

Text: Heb 6.4-6

We turn again to Hebrews 6.4-6, one of the most challenging passages to interpret in the book of Hebrews, if not the whole New Testament.

Last week we emphasized one point: whatever this passage means, it *cannot* mean that a genuinely born again person can lose their salvation. Salvation is eternal, it is the work of God, and mere man cannot undo the work of God.

Well, that settles it, right? Wrong!

We all know tragic stories of someone who seemed to be a Christian, served in a local church for some time, years even, and then seemingly for no reason just fell away and no longer walks with the Lord.

What happened? Were they believers or not? Can we tell?

There are only two options to that question.

There are also only two options to the description of “those people” we see described in our text:

Read Heb 6.4-6

You will notice that our text says, “in the case of those who...” It is “those people” that I want to describe.

Who Are Those People?

The phrases used to describe them mean one of two things. The obvious meaning, it seems to me, is that those people are Christian people. Not merely professing Christians, not fake Christians, but real Christians.

This is what causes our problem with the passage. If the passage means to describe real Christians, it also seems to suggest that real Christians can fall away. Is it saying they can lose their salvation? From what we saw last week that outcome seems impossible.

How do we solve the conundrum?

One interpretation is that these phrases only *seem* to refer to real Christians. The reality is that they aren't really Christians.

That's an easy solution, and it solves all the problems of the passage.

Or does it?

I contend it doesn't, mostly because that is not what the text says.

Proposition: The author of Hebrews warns real Christians of the danger of falling away, a warning every believer should take to heart.

I. The “inconclusive” view summarized

A. Those once enlightened

1. Enlightened not a technical NT word for “believing and receiving” but refers to gaining insight/knowledge (true)
2. At most means, “those who heard and understood the gospel”

“Certainly such intellectual understanding of the facts of the gospel is an important step toward saving faith, but it does not itself constitute the element of personal trust in Christ that is essential to faith.”¹

B. Those who tasted the heavenly gift

1. Tasting doesn’t mean swallowing (Mt 27.34)
2. Heavenly gift: doesn’t explicitly mean salvation; perhaps “some experience ... of the Holy Spirit — perhaps in convicting them of sin”²

C. Those who have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit

1. Though “partakers” means salvation when you are a partaker of Christ (Heb 3.14)
2. It only means comrades or companions elsewhere

“The phrase may mean simply that these people had come into the church and there had experienced some of the benefits of the Holy Spirit in answers to prayer or even in using some spiritual gifts.”³

¹ Wayne Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study from Hebrews 6.4-6 and Other Warning Passages of Hebrews,” in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1995).

² Grudem.

³ Grudem.

D. Those who tasted the good word of God

1. Means to “come to know and even feel something of its truthfulness and power”⁴
2. But not the same as saving faith

E. Those who tasted the powers of the age to come

1. They’ve seen or felt some work of the Spirit
2. Could even preach the gospel themselves, though from wrong motives
3. And Grudem again emphasizes that “tasting” is temporary, not necessarily permanent

I’ve been using Wayne Grudem’s words here, but you can find similar words in John MacArthur’s commentary on Hebrews, and many other Calvinists (including John Calviin himself, who came up with the idea about “tasting” as far as I can tell).

“Most attempts at analyzing this passage fall into the trap of putting theology before exegesis.”⁵

II. The “plain reading” view

A. Those once enlightened

1. Thayer: “to enlighten spiritually, imbue with saving knowledge”⁶
2. Bauer: “to make known in reference to the inner life or transcendent matters and thus enlighten, enlighten, give light to, shed light upon”⁷

Jn 1.9 ¶ There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.

⁴ Grudem.

⁵ David Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary 35 (Nashville, Tenn: B & H Publ. Group, 2010), 344.

⁶ Joseph Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (International Bible Translators (IBT), Inc., 1889).

⁷ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

2 Tim 1.10 but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel,

2 Cor 4.4 in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

- a. Every one of these words is in the “completed action” tense (aorist)
- b. We are not talking about a process “those *are being enlightened*”
- c. We are not talking about an event with an ongoing effect “having been enlightened”
- d. We are talking about the whole event, from start to finish
- e. In this case, the event happened in the past: enlightened (what more needs to happen)
- f. The clincher:

Heb 10.32 ¶ But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings,

B. Those who tasted the heavenly gift

1. What is the gift?

Jn 4.10 Jesus answered and said to her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.”

Jn 6.51 “I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.”

Rm 6.23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Jas 1.17-18 Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.¹⁸ In the exercise of

His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.

2 Cor 9.15 Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

(In 2 Cor 9.15, he is talking about the testimony of the Corinthian believers, who had the “indescribable gift”)

2. What is the tasting?

“Calvin vainly attempts to make the clause refer only to ‘those who had but as it were *tasted with their outward lips* the grace of God, and been irradiated *with some sparks of His Light.*’ This is not to *explain* Scripture, but to *explain it away* in favour of some preconceived doctrine.”⁸

1 Pt 2.3 if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.

Heb 2.9 But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, *namely*, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone.

C. Those who have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit

1. The word here is the powerful “partakers” of 3.14

Heb 3.14 For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end,

2. How can you be a full partaker of Christ and a partial partaker of the Holy Spirit

3. The word has to do with partnership, a close and unbreakable tie

D. Those who tasted the good word of God

1. Again, we have the word tasted, but see above

a. And here, we could see how someone could take in a bit and not the whole

b. But in context, it must mean more than that

⁸ Farrar, *Hebrews*, 82.

2. Here, the “word of God” isn’t merely just a few verses out of some passage: it is the gospel

E. Those who [tasted] the powers of the age to come

1. Those who say it is less than conversion insist it merely means they saw some apostles work a miracle or two (nothing in the text about that)

2. What are the powers of the age to come?

a. Victory over sin

b. New heart that loves the things of God

c. The genuine spiritual unity of a local church

d. The indwelling Holy Spirit

Gal 3.5 So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?

III. Additional discussion of the two positions

A. Historical survey on Heb 6

1. Early church fathers unanimously took the passage to refer to Christians

Their question was, “if someone sins, can they repent, and if they can repent must they receive baptism again” — Chrysostom thought they could repent but not have a new baptism, lest they “crucify Christ afresh”

2. Around the time of the Reformation two views emerged

a. Catholics: one could lose salvation by unbelief or mortal sins

b. Calvin: those described were recipients of grace “short of regeneration” (but even apostasy predestined)

3. Seventeenth c.

a. proposal from William Gouge

1) Apostates themselves claimed these characteristics

2) From this state, they fell into apostasy

- b. John Owen taught there were those who appeared to be believers, but were false (the general Reformed teaching today)
- 4. General and Freewill Baptists have believed true believers could lose their salvation
- 5. Most other Baptists teach preservation (or perseverance) of saints (though not necessarily Reformed soteriology)

The testimony of the early church is significant.

B. Some probing questions

1. Why would mere professors be warned of apostasy? They are already lost.
2. Why would non-Christians be urged to press on to maturity? Why would he not be evangelizing them instead?
3. If they are not believers, how could they be “renewed to repentance” (v. 6) if they had never repented the

“If the author is referring to unsaved people, this is the only place in the New Testament where such language can be said to be used in this fashion.”⁹

Conclusion:

We must conclude that the author is describing true belief. He is writing to true believers. He is warning them of danger. He does not deny their faith.

Proposition: The author of Hebrews warns real Christians of the danger of falling away, a warning every believer should take to heart.

While we think this passage isn't describing “false professors” we do not deny that there *are* false professors: people who think they are Christians but are not.

Next time we will discuss the falling away. What is it?

The only thing I can say today is that it isn't something any one of us wants to do.

What we want is men and women who cling to Jesus Christ and ask him to change their hearts every day.

⁹ Allen, *Hebrews*, 353.