

Text: Heb 4.6

Last week we discussed the spiritual qualities listed in Heb 6.4-5. We concluded that they described someone who was born again, a “true” Christian.

“The obvious implication is that these four phrases describe someone who is a believer. It is difficult to imagine the author using such terminology to describe apparent or pseudo-believers, much less those who profess salvation, but who do not actually, in his mind, possess it.”¹

Even if you grant some ambiguity to the phrases individually, as Calvinists teach, Farrar responds:

“It will, then, be seen that we cannot attach a definitely certain or exact meaning to the separate expressions; on the other hand nothing can be clearer than the fact that, but for dogmatic prepossessions, no one would have dreamed of explaining them to mean anything less than full conversion.”²

I see no Biblical reason to assume that the people the author of Hebrews describes are anything but born again Christians.

But there is this next quality in verse 6 ...

... and *then* have fallen away ...

And this sets our spiritual minds on “Tilt” ... What do we do with this?

Read Heb 6.1-6, text 6

We’ve seen that eternal life is eternal. We’ve seen that Jesus will not let anyone who has eternal life escape out of his hands.

That brings us to this question:

What Is Falling Away?

¹ David Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary 35 (Nashville, Tenn: B & H Publ. Group, 2010), 350.

² F. W. Farrar, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews, With Notes and Introduction.*, Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893), 83.

Now, we need to note that the word “then” is in italics. It is inserted by our translators, but it isn’t in the Greek.

The description is of a present reality, each phrase describes something true about the person:

- They have once been enlightened
- They have tasted the heavenly gift
- They have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit
- They have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the life to come

and

- They have fallen away

Logically, of course, the “then” is there. A person doesn’t start at this place of falling away, but this is where he is now: born again *and* fallen away.

Proposition: Falling away from Christ is a concept that should terrify sincere believers, even though we know salvation is eternal.

I. The meaning of falling away (word study)

A. Word basics: *falling away*

1. Only used here in the NT
2. It is used six times in the LXX, five of those in Ezekiel, one in Esther
3. In Rm 5.20, the noun form of the word is a synonym of a more familiar word for sin

Rm 5.20 The Law came in so that the **transgression** [Heb 6] would increase; but where **sin** increased, grace abounded all the more,

a. Sin: word pic, “missing the mark”

b. Transgression: word pic, “falling alongside the path”

In other words, one view of sin is to fail to meet God’s standard, but another view is to walk off the path of righteousness.

These are *overlapping* terms, not identical terms.

B. Insight from the Old Testament use

1. From Esther, Haman is required to do exactly as the king commands, don't step off the path

Est 6.10 Then the king said to Haman, "Take quickly the robes and the horse as you have said, and do so for Mordecai the Jew, who is sitting at the king's gate; **do not fall short** in anything of all that you have said."

2. Both verb and noun frequently used together in Ezekiel, following a Hebrew idiom

Ezek 14.13 "Son of man, if a country sins against Me by **committing unfaithfulness**, and I stretch out My hand against it, destroy its supply of bread, send famine against it and cut off from it both man and beast,

Ezek 15.8 'Thus I will make the land desolate, because they have **acted unfaithfully**,'" declares the Lord GOD.

Also, Ezek 18.24, 20.27 – to match the Heb, it could be trans. "to unfaithfully commit unfaithfulness" or, "they fell into fallenness"

- a. In Ezekiel, the term is used to describe the unfaithfulness of the Israelite nation who fell away from God's ways into idolatry
- b. For this fall, in the OT, God ultimately punished the nations by bringing the Babylonians against them

It is hard to make an exact parallel from the Ezek passages, since there it is a nation, not an individual, who is in view (as in Heb.).

3. The "unfaithfulness" of the Hebrew word illustrated in Num 5.12
 - a. Note: the LXX Gk in Num 5.12 is not "fall away" but "over look, look past" (or "ignore")
 - b. The Hebrew construction in Num 5.12 is the same as the Ezekiel passages already mentioned

Num 5.12 "Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'If any man's wife goes astray and is **unfaithful** to him,

C. Spiritual unfaithfulness

1. There are various levels of unfaithfulness
 - a. Forgetfulness, sloppiness
 - b. Rebellion, disobedience
 - c. Rejection, deliberate defiance
2. The unfaithful wife of Num 5.12
 - a. This is not mere forgetfulness
 - b. It is rebellion, but one can rebel without being unfaithful
 - c. This is a rebellion which deliberately breaks the covenant, preferring someone else over the lawfully wedded husband

“It is obvious, then, that to ‘commit a trespass’ means to act unfaithfully, to break a contract. The general idea is defection or unfaithfulness.”³

D. Is this apostasy?

1. Many commentators bluntly state that falling away is apostasy

They offer no support for the notion
2. The unfaithful wife of Num 5 remains the wife of her husband
 - a. She has committed a serious breach
 - b. She has broken her covenant
 - c. But she remains married

Now we need to qualify the illustration: this is the OT word, not the NT word, though there is an overlap in meaning

II. The interpretational options

- A. That a Christian can lose his salvation (contradicted by other Scriptures)
- B. That someone can be interested in Christianity, but fall away after “tasting it” and not receiving it (but why not evangelize such a one?)

³ Victor P. Hamilton, “1230 נָטַעַל,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 520.

“well-instructed unbelievers”

- C. That only Hebrew Christians living before the destruction of the temple could commit this sin, whatever it is (pre-AD 70)
- D. That the emphasis is on the impossibility of repentance *if* a Christian rejected his salvation (the passage describes a possibility, not a reality)
- E. That a Christian, reacting against his Christian testimony for some reason, can lose any further opportunity of service [and privileges in the millennial kingdom]
- F. That a Christian can turn away from God’s truth and embrace error (be unfaithful) [different from losing one’s salvation]

III. The present application

- A. Falling away isn’t simply sinning and slipping out of salvation
 - 1. All Christians sin (unfortunately) on a regular basis
 - a. Does one sin constitute falling away?
 - b. Does a series of sins constitute a falling away?
 - c. Does a lifestyle of sin constitute a falling away?
 - 2. Sin frequently occurs seemingly without much forethought
 - a. Someone offends you; you flash up in anger: have you fallen away?
 - b. You see a sign, an ad, a movie, whatever; your mind begins to think an evil thought: have you fallen away?
 - c. You get into a state of depression, you decide to drink your troubles away, which leads to bad companions, bad decisions, sometimes with terrible consequence: have you fallen away?

I knew a man who once had an outstanding Christian testimony. He was changed from his old life, was active in his church, a constant witness for Christ.

Something happened in his life, and he quit going to church. He became bitter and withdrew from Christian fellowship.

He got into gambling, and lived his life apart from his family, wasting his money in Las Vegas and Reno.

One night, I talked to him about his choices. He was humble, professed (still) faith in Christ, acknowledged his lack of wisdom and so forth. I thought I might be getting somewhere.

The next night, I opened the subject again and he was ready... full of bitterness about past hurts, self-justification, etc.

He never did deny Christ, however. He simply justified his sin.

Was he fallen away? (I do not know.)

B. Falling away involves a deliberate action (a renunciation)

1. Just as the unfaithful wife needs to take a deliberate action to express unfaithfulness, so the unfaithful Christian must deliberately turn away from faith
2. Remember what the Hebrew Christians were faced with
 - a. Persecution (probably Jewish) for their acceptance of Christ
 - b. Temptation to go back to Judaism to avoid persecution
 - c. Justifying idea that “well, we would still be worshiping the true God”
 - d. It seems to me, this is the falling away — a turning aside, deliberately turning from Christ, for temporary advantage in this life

Conclusion:

Proposition: Falling away from Christ is a concept that should terrify sincere believers, even though we know salvation is eternal.

The possibility of persecution still exists. What will you do if such persecution comes?

Our passages warns that falling away brings terrible consequences (more next week).

Now, before we close, we are not saying that it is OK for a Christian to sin *at all*. Sin is still sin. It still brings a barrier between you and God.

If you sin, you should feel remorse, and feel God's disapproval.

You should want to live "approved of God."

Read a wonderful testimonial of Daniel in my Bible reading the other day:

Dan 9.21-23 while I was still speaking in prayer, then the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision previously, came to me in *my* extreme weariness about the time of the evening offering.²² He gave *me* instruction and talked with me and said, "O Daniel, I have now come forth to give you insight with understanding."²³ "At the beginning of your supplications the command was issued, and I have come to tell *you*, for **you are highly esteemed**; so give heed to the message and gain understanding of the vision.

Do you live your Christian life so that you are highly esteemed by God?