

Text: Heb 6.4-6

Today we come to the conclusion of our messages on this most difficult text, Heb 6.6.

How to begin this last message on the passage?

We have a warning to believers lest they fall away. If they do, they cannot be renewed to repentance, the author of Hebrews warns. What does he mean?

As I think about the scenario, I tried to think of an illustration of how to explain what we are talking about.

In 1780, a man who was a decorated officer, winning several battles and serving with some distinction, gained notoriety by changing sides amid the conflict.

You may already know his name, Americans will surely guess that it is Benedict Arnold.

I don't have time to tell his whole story, but his name became synonymous with infamy and betrayal, especially in America. (From our perspective, he came to his senses, and got on the right side!)

At the point of exposure, he was passing plans to the British, and was the commander West Point, a major American stronghold at the time. He planned to hand West Point over to the British, but his plans came to light and he had to flee.

We are many years from that conflict, but Benedict Arnold, even in our country, is not thought of highly.

Now for our passage, let's read the text:

Heb 6.1-6

We've contended all along for the book of Hebrews that the great temptation they were facing came from the pressure put on them by unconverted Jews. The temptation was to go back to Judaism, renounce Christianity, and return to where they were.

I've suggested that this is probably what is meant by "falling away" in v. 6.

- Falling away, here, isn't backsliding, living a sinful lifestyle while professing faith (that is a bad thing, but it isn't *this* bad thing)
- Rather, the falling away is, after having come to know the Lord, falling away and identifying with Judaism (in this case)

Historically, similar temptations faced Gentile Christians.

“In June of 250, Emperor Decius' efforts to restore glory to Rome came to fruition in the form of mandatory cultic sacrifice to the Roman gods. All citizens were required to offer incense or a burnt sacrifice to the cultus of Rome. All who resisted were threatened with the loss of property and privilege. Clergy and bishops were intentionally targeted and tortured until fealty was sworn to Rome and the Roman pantheon. Sadly, many succumbed to this persecution and became apostate.”¹

After the persecution, some of these apostates wanted to return to the church. What could they do with them? And how does Hebrews apply to them?

The answer of the church in the third century wasn't tremendously satisfying, but it's the kind of problem we are faced with as we wrestle with the text.

Verse 6 says, “it is impossible to renew them again to repentance” ... what does that mean?

I. The meaning of repentance in Hebrews

A. The use of the term in Hebrews

Heb 6.1 ¶ Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of **repentance** from dead works and of faith toward God,

Heb 6.6 and *then* have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to **repentance**, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.

Heb 12.16-17 that *there be* no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a *single* meal.¹⁷ For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for **repentance**, though he sought for it with tears.

Whatever the meaning in v. 6 is, it most likely is informed by its use in the other references.

¹ Philip Bartelt, “Cyprian on Rebaptism,” 1517 - Christ For You, accessed November 25, 2023, <https://www.1517.org/articles/cyprian-on-rebaptism>.

B. The word itself

1. Etymological meaning: “to know after”
 - a. Opposite is “to know before”
 - b. Means that understanding comes after the mistake

Greek writer, Epicharmus (460 BC) said: “The wise man must not know after but know before”²

2. Developed meaning
 - a. After-knowledge
 - b. Change of mind
 - c. Regret
 - d. Change of conduct

In secular usage, someone can repent of good acts, and replace with bad.

Trench gives an illustration from Plutarch, where two murderers spared a child, thought better of it, and then put the child to death.

3. New Testament meaning

“In the NT, *metanoēō* and *metanoia* (56 occurrences) retain this basic meaning, ‘change opinions, regret, be grieved about something,’ but they are used almost exclusively for the attitude of unbelievers and sinners returning to God, and they are laden with a new theological density; they form an essential part of the [gospel] lexicon, urging ‘conversion’ to Christianity. There is no longer any question of distinguishing between change of thoughts, of heart, of actions. The change is that of the soul, of the whole person (the new creature), who is purified of stains and whose life is transformed, metamorphosed.”³

² Epicharmus, quoted in Ceslas Spicq and James D. Ernest, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1994), 472.

³ Spicq and Ernest, 475.

Lk 5.32 “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

- a. The verb, “repent,” primarily used in the Gospels, Acts, and Revelation
- b. The noun, “repentance,” also primarily used in the Gospels, with a few uses in the epistles

C. The usage in Hebrews

1. Heb 6.1

Heb 6.1 ¶ Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of **repentance** from dead works and of faith toward God,

- a. Repentance here refers to the beginning of salvation
- b. The author is not going to rehash gospel basics, taking them back to the foundation (which is repentance from dead works and faith in Christ)
- c. He intends to build on their foundation, pressing on to maturity, with “solid food” (5.14) and “much ... hard to explain”
- d. “This we will do” (6.3)

2. Heb 6.6

Heb 6.6 and *then* have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to **repentance**, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.

- a. Emphatic warning — “impossible” actually in v. 4

Impossible it is for those ... having salvation *and* falling away ... to renew the to repentance

- b. This is the reason for pressing on: to avoid this fate for his current audience
 - 1) There were likely some “those” who had fallen away

2) They had fallen off the foundation, there is no placing them back (we explain why shortly)

3) He wants to press on and build on the foundation so the Hebrews avoid the danger

c. The danger appears to be a possibility for the Hebrews, not a reality

3. Heb 12.27

Heb 12.16-17 that *there be* no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a *single* meal.¹⁷ For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for **repentance**, though he sought for it with tears.

a. Esau “sold his birthright for a meal”

b. He held his birthright in low esteem, and just for hunger, abandoned it

c. By his choice, he was not allowed to come back to his former state

d. By comparison, if he could not return to repentance, how shall someone repent who doesn’t value Christianity enough to stand against persecution?

II. The reasons repentance is impossible

A. They crucify the Son of God afresh

1. They called on the crucified Christ for salvation

2. By defecting, it is as if they crucify him (for themselves) again

B. They put Him to open shame

1. Their defection is public

2. They expose the work of Christ in them to disgrace

“It is a terrible picture and cannot be toned down.”⁴

⁴ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Heb 6.6.

III. Those who can repent

A. A false professor can repent (Ac 8, Simon Magus)

1. Simon “believed” — but apparently not truly (Ac 8.13)
2. Peter called Simon to repent (Ac 8.22)

As far as we know he never did

B. Sinning Christians can repent

1. Of spiritual apathy (Rev 2.4-5)
2. Of tolerating immoral false teachers (Rev 2.14-16)
3. Of tolerating immorality in the church (Rev 2.20-23)
4. Of spiritual deadness (Rev 3.2-4)
5. Of spiritual lethargy and worldliness (Rev 3.15, 17-19)

C. But those who fall away, who abandon the name of Christ for personal safety: it is impossible to be renewing them to repentance

“Temporally, this discipline involves loss of opportunity to go on to maturity in the Christian life, loss of effective service for Christ in this life, loss of the blessings of God that come from an obedient life, and in some cases perhaps premature physical death. Eschatologically, it involves loss of rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ (Rom 14:10–12; 1 Cor 3:10–15; 2 Cor 5:10) and perhaps loss of position of leadership/service in the coming millennial kingdom (from a premillennial perspective). These are genuine believers who are in danger of forfeiting some new covenant blessings in this life as well as rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ.”⁵

Conclusion:

I began telling you about Benedict Arnold. After his betrayal, he was made an officer in the British Army and fought against his former companions.

⁵ David Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary 35 (Nashville, Tenn: B & H Publ. Group, 2010), 377.

After the war he made his way through life, investing in various projects to provide for his family, some successful, some not.

He spent some years in Canada, some of his descendants still live here.

He died in England in 1801 at the age of 60. On one occasion, the French statesman, Talleyrand, heard of him and came to visit him:

The innkeeper at whose place I had my meals informed me that one of his lodgers was an American general. Thereupon I expressed the desire of seeing that gentleman, and, shortly after, I was introduced to him. After the usual exchange of greetings ... I ventured to request from him some letters of introduction to his friends in America. "No," he replied, and after a few moments of silence, noticing my surprise, he added, "I am perhaps the only American who cannot give you letters for his own country ... all the relations I had there are now broken ... I must never return to the States." He dared not tell me his name. It was General Arnold.

I must confess that I felt much pity for him, for which political puritans will perhaps blame me, but with which I do not reproach myself, for I witnessed his agony.⁶

There was no going back for Arnold.

And it is impossible to be renewing to repentance those who fall away from Christ.

⁶ "Benedict Arnold," in *Wikipedia*, November 21, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Benedict_Arnold&oldid=1186122788#To_Canada,_then_back_to_England.