

XIII. Don't Fall Away!

March 20/21/22, 2018

Hebrews 6:4-12

Aim: To heed the warning to avoid spiritual apostasy and to make our salvation sure by persevering in love of God and good works in imitation of the faithful.

A. Warning to Avoid Spiritual Apostasy (Hebrews 6:4-8)

Schreiner: The author strongly warns the readers in this paragraph. The spiritual sluggishness and infancy of the readers is not a neutral state, nor can they continue to live as spiritual infants. They must go to the place where they can digest solid food. In other words, they must progress on to maturity so that the fundamental teachings of the faith do not need to be repeated constantly. In verses 4-8 the author explains why the readers should go on to maturity, for if those who have experienced such astonishing blessings fall away and crucify again the Son of God, then there is no room for repentance for them.

Hughes: The writer feels compelled to deepen his warning, and he does so by giving what many consider the most terrifying warning in the New Testament—that there can be no second beginning.

Phillips: The writer of Hebrews wants us to advance because it is the only way to be sure of salvation and endure to the end. This has been the point of the writer's third major exhortation, beginning at verse 11 of chapter 5. The author chides his readers for their lack of diligence and progress. 'By this time you ought to be teachers' (5:12), he said, yet they had barely progressed beyond spiritual infancy. Now, starting at 6:4, he goes on to give the most urgent reason for their growth in the faith, namely, the real and terrible danger of apostasy. This passage is one of the most sober in all of Scripture, as well as one of the most fiercely contested, and we need to take careful stock of what it says. There are two main issues: first, who or what kind of person is described as falling away; and second, why the situation of apostasy is so very terrible.

1. Strong Warning (6:4-6)

[DSB Note: The interpretation of these verses depends, in large measure, upon whom one understands them to refer to. 1) *Schreiner* believes these verses describe Christians; however, he doesn't believe Christians can ultimately fall away; hence these verses serve as a warning and a means of preservation. One could in essence call his position *hypothetical*, since he doesn't believe Christians can fall away, even though they are the ones addressed. 2) *Bruce*, *Phillips*, and *Hughes* all see them as addressed to members within the covenant community who are nonetheless unbelievers. *Bruce* is the most circumspect, but clearly believes that those who are Christians persevere, while those who do not persevere were never converted in the first place. *Hughes* is the most direct, clearly stating reasons why Christians cannot fall away. *Phillips* discusses a *sacramental* position where the descriptions refers to catechumens (who are not necessarily converted) and a *typological* view where the exodus generation is being described. Ultimately, both of these positions boil down to unbelievers within the covenant community. 3) *MacArthur* also strongly affirms the perseverance of the saints and declares that the description refers to unbelievers, but puts on a Jewish twist – these are Jewish believers who remain in Judaism and have never fully embraced Christianity or been converted. I hold to the non-Christian position as well – believers cannot lose their salvation. *Phillips* makes an excellent

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point missed by other commentators: the description in these verses is in third person, not first or second person. Thus, he is not directly addressing any particular member or segment of the Hebrews audience, but describing for them what apostasy looks like, warning them against it, and then encouraging them in 6:9-12 that he has *not* been describing them. With this in mind, it is easier to accept a position where he is generally describing what apostasy looks like, rather than accusing the readers of it themselves.]

a) *The Character of Apostasy (6:4b-6a)*

...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 come⁶ and then have fallen away...

Phillips: One of the problems in dealing with this text is deciding just who or what is being described. There are three main answers, each of which depends upon the interpretation of what these descriptions portray. But before addressing these, we can make two important observations. The first is that the writer is not describing his readers themselves. I say this because he shifts from his constant use of the first and second person to the third person. In both the passages before and after these verses, he speaks of ‘us’ and ‘you.’ But here he shifts to the third person: now it is ‘those who have been enlightened.’ This tells us he is not speaking directly of his readers’ situation, an observation that is confirmed by verse 9: ‘In your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things.’

Phillips: Second, we should nevertheless avoid describing this as a hypothetical situation. A number of translations give this impression by using the term ‘if.’ This does not appear in the Greek text, which is best rendered not by the phrase ‘if they fall away,’ but ‘those who have fallen away.’ The situation of apostasy is very real, a very terrible possibility that must be earnestly avoided. It is something that does happen and will happen to real people. Indeed, it may be that there are particular people in view here who have fallen away and can no longer be restored.

Hughes: There are three ways this passage has been understood: hypothetical; actual; and apparent.

(1) Warning Addressed to Christians

Hughes: One view says it refers to a hypothetical situation that has never existed and therefore is a warning about a sin that is impossible to commit. The situation is presented by the writer as a warning to keep Christians from apostatizing. It is simply a sanctifying ‘what if’ line of thought. The obvious problem with this view is that if the sin cannot be committed, it is absurd to offer it as an argument against falling to it! [DSB Note: this is essentially the position of Schreiner, presented below].

Schreiner: To whom is the warning addressed? The author describes the recipients of the warning in five ways in verses 4-5. As Lane says, ‘The recital of what occurred in the reception of the gospel does not describe a succession of salvific events but the one event of salvation that is viewed from different aspects and manifestations.’ The central dispute is whether those addressed are described as Christians or as those who are almost Christians. I will argue here that the language used points to Christians.

Schreiner: Some maintain that a mixed audience composed of both believers and unbelievers is addressed. Such an observation is almost certainly true on one level. It is difficult to believe that

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every single person in the congregation was truly a believer. Such an observation, however, skirts the fundamental question the text raises, and that question should still be answered. The question that must be resolved is whether the author *describes* the recipients as believers or unbelievers. When we look at the specific terms the author uses, does he address his readers as believers or as those who were almost but not quite believers. No doubt the audience was mixed, but the question being asked here is how the author describes the readers, and I will argue that he describes them as Christians. He doesn't address them as a mixed audience. [DSB Note: Schreiner's argument is not compelling. The author is not directly addressing the readers and describing them in this fashion. He is not saying 'you' are this way. Rather, he is talking more abstractly, about 'those' who are this way. Also, he doesn't then follow through with this argument to its logical conclusion – that believers can lose their salvation. Thus, his position is 'hypothetical' to use the terminology of Hughes.]

Hughes: Another interpretation is that those who fall away are actual, bona-fide Christians. Those who hold this view believe that God supplies grace to those who are trusting Him, but the ultimate perseverance of any believer depends on the cooperation of his free will. Therefore, any Christian, whatever his state, is capable of the apostasy and condemnation here described. [DSB Note: None of the five commentators holds the position that true Christians can fall away].

Phillips: We are now in a position to address the three main views regarding the identity of the people who fall away. The first is that these descriptions depict real salvation, that is, individuals who have been converted and have possessed a true and saving faith in Christ. The reason for this view is evident when we see just how strong the statements are. People who hold this interpretation cite these verses as a key proof against the assurance of salvation or eternal security. John Wesley was typical of many others when he wrote: 'On this authority, I believe a saint may fall away; that one who is holy or righteous in the judgment of God Himself may nevertheless so fall from God as to perish everlasting.'

Phillips: This is a compelling argument, but it is one that has very serious problems. The first is that this interpretation directly contradicts the many passages that do teach the eternal security of those who are born again and do possess genuine saving faith. Wesley's view flatly denies statements like the one Jesus made in John 10:28-29. There are many other statements to this effect, like those in John 6:36-40, Romans 8:38-39, and Philippians 1:6. The second reason why Wesley's view cannot be accurate comes from this very chapter of Hebrews. In this case, the writer concludes this chapter with a bold statement of assurance for those who have truly received the gospel. Perhaps mindful of the false conclusion some may draw, in verse 17 he writes of 'the unchangeable character of [God's] purpose' with regard to 'the heirs of promise.' The point is that what stands behind all human activity is God's sovereign ordination and promise. 'We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul (6:19). These are hardly the words of someone who wants to convey a fundamental insecurity to those who have trusted Christ.

(a) *Once Been Enlightened (6:4b)*

...in the case of those who have once been enlightened...

Schreiner: First, they 'were once enlightened.' There is no contextual indication that the enlightenment was partial or inadequate or insufficient in any way. The word 'once' (*απαξ*, *apax*) suggests a decisive event, which is naturally interpreted to be at conversion, for at their conversion they were illuminated in that they received the knowledge of God. The word

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‘enlightened’ (*φοτισθεντας, photisthentas*) is also used in 10:32, where it naturally refers to the conversion of the readers. Neither in 10:32 nor in 6:4 does the author hint in any way that they were ‘almost enlightened.’

(b) *Tasted the Heavenly Gift (6:4c)*

...who have tasted the heavenly gift...

Schreiner: Second, the readers ‘tasted the heavenly gift.’ It is difficult to be sure what the writer means by ‘gift’ (*δωρεας, dōreas*). Elsewhere in the NT, the word is used for the gift of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 4:10; Acts 2:38; 8:20; 10:45; 11:17), or the gift of righteousness (Rom. 5:17). A reference to the Holy Spirit is possible, but seems unlikely since he mentions the Holy Spirit in the next verse. The gift is ‘heavenly,’ i.e. it is transcendent, coming down from above. It seems most satisfying to say the author thinks generally of the new life or salvation of the readers. The words used give no indication that the gift was partial. Instead, the gift was ‘heavenly,’ i.e., it was from the God who reigns over all. Some have maintained that the readers are not described here as truly saved because they ‘tasted’ (*γευσάμενους, geysamenous*) the heavenly gift.’ The metaphor of ‘tasting’ could signify partiality, for we may ‘sip’ something or take just a taste of something without swallowing it down. The word ‘taste’ does have that meaning in some texts (e.g., Mt. 27:34). But normally the word *taste* means ‘to experience fully’ or is another way of describing eating (cp. Mt. 16:28; Lk. 14:24; Jn. 8:52; Acts 20:11; 23:14; Col. 2:21). Most important, elsewhere in Hebrews the word clearly means to experience fully. The author refers to Jesus’ ‘tasting’ (*γευσῆται, geysētai*) death (2:9). Certainly Jesus did not just sip death or dabble with it a bit. He died! He experienced fully all the horrors of death. So, when the author says the readers ‘tasted the heavenly gift,’ the expression most naturally means they experienced the salvation that comes from above.

(c) *Shared the Holy Spirit (6:4d)*

...and have shared in the Holy Spirit...

Schreiner: Third, the author describes those who ‘have shared in’ (ESV, NIV) or ‘become partakers’ (NET) of the Holy Spirit. Does the word ‘shared’ suggest experiences with the Spirit that fell short of a saving experience with the Spirit? Certainly there are experiences with the Holy Spirit that do not constitute salvation. The story of Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8:9-24 fits such a pattern. This interpretation should be rejected, however, for the word ‘shared in’ (*μετοχους, metochous*) denotes full participation. The use of the word group in Hebrews makes this clear. In 3:1, believing human beings share a heavenly calling, while in 3:14 they are truly sharers of Christ if they persevere to the end. The author tells us that those who are truly sons share in discipline (12:8). The verb ‘share’ or ‘partake’ (*μετεχω, metechō*) is used to say that Jesus shared flesh and blood with human beings (2:14). There is no doubt that Jesus fully shared flesh and blood, i.e., humanity, with us. The closest reference is 5:13, where the readers partake of milk. Again they were ingesting milk instead of solid food. There is no evidence whatsoever that the word refers to a partial sharing or partaking.

Schreiner: The gift of the Holy Spirit is the clearest indication in the NT that one is a Christian, so for the author to say that the readers were sharers of the Holy Spirit demonstrates that he is saying they were Christians. In fact, it is hard to imagine a clearer way of saying that the readers were believers. Now, this is not to deny that the congregation had some false believers in it. Doubtless, the congregation was mixed in this sense. Surely some were not authentically

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Christian. But it is crucial to make an important distinction here. The writer specifically addresses believers in the warning. The terms he uses don't suggest inadequate or partial belief. Instead, he uses expressions that designation Christian believers in the fullest sense of the word.

(d) *Tasted the Good Word of God (6:5a)*

...⁵ *and have tasted the goodness of the word of God...*

Schreiner: Fourth, those described 'tasted God's good word.' The word 'taste' (*γευσσαμενους, geysamenous*) is the same word investigated in the previous verse. Here the author says they fully ingested God's word by receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is this 'word' that the leaders taught them as new believers (13:7). Again there is nothing to suggest that their initial reception was false or superficial.

(e) *Tasted the Powers of the Age to Come (6:5b)*

...*and the powers of the age to come...*

Schreiner: Fifth, they also 'tasted the powers of the coming age.' The word 'taste' does double-duty here for both this phrase and the previous one. It is clear that the readers truly experienced the power of the age to come. The distinction between this age and the age to come is a typical feature of NT eschatology. The readers were catapulted into the future age of God's reign in the midst of the present evil age. They had experienced God's end-time blessings in a powerful way. The word 'powers' (*δυναμεις, dynameis*) suggests a real and dynamic experience, not something that was ineffectual.

(f) *Fallen Away (6:6a)*

...⁶ *and then have fallen away...*

Schreiner: The final of the six descriptors is found in the words, 'who have fallen away' (*παραπεσοντας, parapesontas*). The word only occurs here in the NT. The verb in Ezekiel (*παραπιπτω, parapiptō*) clearly designates apostasy (Ez. 14:13; 15:8; 18:24; 20:27; 22:4). Judah suffers exile for forsaking the Lord. The text in Ez. 18:24 is particularly clear. Those who devote themselves to iniquity will die because of their transgressions, since they have repudiated the Lord and His ways. Context is determinative for assigning a particular meaning in any case, and the word used here is parallel to the different words for falling away elsewhere in the warning passages. In other words, the author refers here to apostasy, to abandoning the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Schreiner: He doesn't assume they *have already fallen away*. Our author does not accuse his addressees of being in this condition. It is a warning that should remind them of the seriousness of their situation and the importance of renewing their commitment. Apostasy is where their 'sluggishness' could lead. If the readers fall away, they can't be renewed to repentance. They will not retrace their steps and put their faith in Christ anew. It is possible that the author has in mind the wilderness generation and Esau who departed from God. Still the wilderness generation and Esau do not stand in the same place as new covenant members, for all members of the new covenant are regenerate. Hence, we must be careful not to see an exact parallel between the OT examples given and the application to the hearers of the letter. The warning passages are a means by which believers are preserved by God. They stimulate and provoke believers to heed the admonition so they don't apostatize.

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(2) Warning Addressed to Non-Christians

MacArthur: First of all, we should notice that this passage makes no reference at all to salvation. There is no mention of justification, sanctification, the new birth, or regeneration. They are not spoken of as born again, made holy, or made righteous. None of the normal New Testament terminology for salvation is used.

Phillips: The second major view of our text is that its language describes participation in the sacramental life of the church. According to this view, ‘once enlightened’ refers to baptism. There is evidence that this terminology was used as early as the second century AD. ‘Tasting the heavenly gift’ speaks of the Lord’s Supper, while ‘sharing the Holy Spirit’ speaks of the laying on of hands. ‘Tasting the goodness of the word of God’ would correspond to preaching in the church, while ‘the powers of the age to come’ would indicate the signs and wonders that accompanied the original preaching of the gospel, and to which the writer of Hebrews already mentioned in chapter 2. This is a compelling picture, and it is one that could apply to those who never truly come to saving faith in Christ, but enjoy these extraordinary privileges through their affiliation with the church. I am not hostile to this interpretation and think the language surely suggests contact with the means of grace found in the church.

Phillips: I think it is far more likely that these word pictures make direct reference not to the sacraments but to the experience of God’s people in the exodus. This is the third major view and the one that best handles the text. The Book of Hebrews contains five major exhortations, of which this is part of the third. Each of the other four make explicit reference to an Old Testament situation. The lengthy exhortation in chapters 3 and 4 draws out the exodus as a basic counter-model for the Christian life, and it is extremely likely that this remains on the writer’s mind in chapter 6. This epistle was written to show that the old covenant both pointed to and was fulfilled by the coming of Jesus Christ. That, along with the reader’s familiarity with the Old Testament, is why the writer consistently draws from Old Testament texts and situations to make points about Christianity. This is his uniform method, and there is no reason to think he has departed from it in this passage which, like the others, derives its imagery from the life of Israel and looks back on the exodus as the general backdrop.

Phillips: With this in mind, we can see that the author offers terminology his original Hebrew-Christian readers would connect with the exodus symbolism. Under this view, ‘once enlightened’ probably refers to the pillar of light that guided the twelve tribes through the desert. The writer of Hebrews does not mean that these Christians literally saw the cloud of fire, but rather experienced what it signified. The same sort of connection can easily be made with each item in the list, such as the manna that Israel ate in the desert, the Word of God that came through Moses, and the astonishing works of power that won Israel’s deliverance from Egypt.

Phillips: What is the point of all this? As we saw back in chapters 3 and 4, the great majority of those who left Egypt with Moses did not enter the Promised Land but rebelled against the Lord, providing as great and terrible a portrait of apostasy as appears in all of Scripture. The warning, therefore, is that, like those who left Egypt as part of Israel, we may have a very real experience of the phenomena of God’s saving power through our participation in the church. By virtue of our affiliation with the people of God, by being in their midst, we can have the very great privileges described in our text and yet not actually enter into salvation. We will be enlightened with knowledge, we will encounter and perhaps benefit from real spiritual power, and we may be influenced and blessed in many ways. That was the very situation with those who left Egypt in the exodus, but fell away under hardship into rebellion and were judged by God so that they died

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in the desert. As we saw earlier in our studies, this is as stark a portrait of eternal despair as appears in all the Scripture. How could this happen? It can happen to us if our hearts are hard toward God, despite our great privileges.

Bruce: From his description of the experiences of those who may nevertheless fall away, it would certainly be difficult to distinguish them at the outset from those who are going to stay the course. Just as the Hebrew spies who returned from their expedition carrying tangible tokens of the good land of Canaan nevertheless failed to enter the land because of their unbelief. So those who had come to know the blessings of the new covenant might nevertheless in a spiritual sense turn back in heart to Egypt and so forfeit the saints' everlasting rest.

Phillips: Whether we take this description as pointing to the sacraments and means of grace in the church or to Israel in the desert (and the two are so closely related that they may both be in view), the point is the same. This passage describes professors of faith who are within the church community—church members, as we would say today—who experience the benefits of God's blessings in the church without every personally committing themselves to faith in Christ. They are like those people Jesus spoke about in the Sermon on the Mount who claimed all sorts of good works in His name, only to be rejected by the Savior: 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness' (Mt. 7:21-23). This is who these people are, those who have a personal but nonetheless secondary or indirect experience with Christianity. They may serve, they may preach, they may handle the powers of the age to come, but they are not really Christ's own.

Bruce: Once more our author emphasizes that continuance is the test of reality. In these verses he is not questioning the perseverance of the saints; we might say rather he is insisting that those who persevere are the true saints. But in fact he is stating a practical truth that has verified itself repeatedly in the experience of the church. Those who have shared in the covenant privileges of the people of God, and then deliberately renounce them, are the most difficult persons of all to reclaim for the faith.

Hughes: The view many, including myself, hold is that those who fall away are not true believers, but rather men and women who only appear so. They are people who have received a thorough exposure to the gospel—for example, the catechized Jewish believers of the preceding verses—and have made an ostensible profession of faith and have been received into the fellowship of God's people. However, at a later point they have abandoned their profession, even becoming opponents of Christ.

Hughes: The reasons I hold to this interpretation are as follows. First, the participation in spiritual realities of those who fall away, though they have been '*enlightened*' and '*shared*' and '*tasted*' the things of God, parallels the privileged experience of the children of Israel in the wilderness who fell away and died in unbelief. True, some of those who perished in the wilderness were regenerate and some were unregenerate, but both were visible members of the covenant community and thus shared a profound mutuality of spiritual experience. Similarly, these catechized ersatz Christians of Hebrews 6 were accepted into the covenant community and likewise experienced something of the spiritual realities, but fell away.

Hughes: Second, Jesus' parable of the soils teaches us there are people who at the beginning look very much like believers, but they are unregenerate. Not only do they look like Christians, but they have remarkable spiritual experiences before they fall away—just as the seed sown in rocky places 'is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy' (Mt. 13:20). But

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when trouble comes ‘he falls away.’ Significantly, in the parable of the soils only the fourth soil, the one that bears fruit, signifies true believers!

Bruce: In our Lord’s parable of the sower, no difference might have been seen for a time between what had sprouted on rocky ground and what was growing on good ground. It was only when a time of testing came that the difference became evident (Mk. 4:3-8). It was a time of testing now for the recipients of the epistle, and our author is anxious that they should respond triumphantly to the test and prove that in their case the seed had fallen into good ground.

Hughes: Third, I hold this view because it accords with the great Scriptural doctrine of the perseverance of the saints that is so specifically affirmed in God’s Word (e.g., Phi. 1:6; Rom. 8:29-30, 38-39; 1 Pe. 1:4-5; Jude 24-25; 2 Tim. 1:12; Eph. 4:30; 1 Jn. 2:19; Mt. 24:24; Jn. 6:40, 54; 10:27-28). Fourth, the positive spiritual experience of those who fall away, described in verses 4-6 are easily within the capacity of the unregenerate, as the successive phrase indicate.

MacArthur: Because they believe the warning is addressed to Christians, many interpreters hold that the passage teaches that salvation can be lost. If this interpretation were true, however, the passage would also teach that, once lost, salvation could never be regained. If, after being saved, a person lost his salvation, he would be damned forever. But Christians are not being addressed, and it is the opportunity for *receiving* salvation, not salvation itself, that can be lost. The believer need never fear he will lose his salvation. He cannot. The Bible is absolutely clear about that. It is unbelievers who are in danger of losing salvation—in the sense of losing the opportunity even to receive it.

(a) *Once Been Enlightened (6:4b)*

...in the case of those who have once been enlightened...

Hughes: These unregenerate ‘Christians’ are among those ‘who have once been enlightened.’ They who had been catechized and admitted into the church were witness to the light that is ‘the Light of the world’ (Jn. 8:12). The light of Christ’s presence had shown upon their recoiling souls. They had begun to see themselves, but now volitionally returned to the dark.

Bruce: It is tempting to understand the verb ‘enlightened’ here in the sense of baptism—a sense which it bore among Christians in Rome in the middle of the second century. At any rate, the enlightenment here is something which has taken place once for all—like baptism itself, which is unrepeatable for the simple reason that its repetition would contradict its whole significance. The light of the gospel has broken in upon these people’s darkness, and life can never be the same again; to give up the gospel would be to sin against the light, the one sin which by its very nature is incurable.

MacArthur: The enlightenment spoken of here has to do with intellectual perception of spiritual, biblical truth. In the Septuagint, the Greek word *phōtizō* several times is translated ‘to give light by knowledge or teaching.’ It means to be mentally aware of something, to be instructed, informed. It carries no connotation of response—of acceptance or rejection, belief or disbelief.

(b) *Tasted the Heavenly Gift (6:4c)*

...who have tasted the heavenly gift...

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Hughes: Next, they had ‘tasted the heavenly gift.’ This may refer to someone who has made a profession of faith or who has been catechized, baptized, and partaken of Communion—thus tasting the heavenly gift—an act an unbeliever is quite capable of.

Bruce: As enlightenment suggests baptism, so the tasting of the heavenly gift may suggest the Eucharist; certain the people in question have partaken of communion in addition to being baptized. And certainly it is possible for people who have experienced both the gospel sacraments to commit apostasy nonetheless. But the ‘heavenly gift’ need not be restricted to the Eucharist; it may indicate the whole sum of spiritual blessings which are sacramentally sealed and signified in the Eucharist.

MacArthur: Christ’s salvation is the supreme heavenly gift, and no doubt the one referred to here. This great gift, however, was not received. It was not feasted on, but only ‘tasted,’ sampled. It was not accepted or lived, only examined. That stands in contrast with Jesus’ work on our behalf. Having tasted death for every man (2:9), He went on to drink it all. Tasting is not eating. [DSB: This is actually not a strong argument – Schreiner points out that ‘tasted’ in 2:9 means to the full and MacArthur also seems to accept that; and yet MacArthur is arguing that ‘tasted’ here means only sampled, not fully accepted.] The Holy Spirit will give us a taste, but He will not make us eat [DSB: Arminian warning!]. God placed the blessing of salvation to the lips of these New Testament Jews, but they had not yet eaten. The tasting came from what they saw and heard, as many today have seen the transforming power of Christ and heard the gospel.

(c) *Shared the Holy Spirit (6:4d)*

...and have shared in the Holy Spirit...

Hughes: The writer also describes these ersatz Christians as those who ‘have shared in the Holy Spirit.’ Here Simon Magus, the sorcerer, is a prime example, because the Scriptures tell us that he ‘believed, and ...[was] baptized,’ thus deriving the ostensible benefit of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:13). Yet Peter rebuked his attempt to purchase the gift of the Holy Spirit with money and called him to repent of his wickedness and ask for forgiveness, if possible (Acts 8:20-23).

MacArthur: ‘Partakers’ (*metochos*) has to do with association, not possession. These Jews had never possessed the Holy Spirit, they simply were around when He was around. The Bible never speaks of Christians being associated with the Holy Spirit. It speaks of the Holy Spirit being *within* them. Here, however, are some persons who are simply associated with the Holy Spirit. They did not possess the Spirit, nor did the Holy Spirit possess them.

Bruce: It is precarious to argue that the personal Holy Spirit is not intended here, but rather His gifts or operations, on the sole ground that the definite article is lacking in the Greek. The presence or absence of the article is not in itself sufficient to decide whether the Giver or His gifts are in question. The people whom the author had in mind had not only been baptized and received the Eucharist, but had experienced the laying on of hands. Early apostolic history has a record of one outstanding character who believed when he heard the gospel, was baptized, attached himself to the evangelist whose preaching had convinced him, and presumably received the Spirit when apostolic hands were laid upon him—yet Simon Magus was pronounced by Peter to be still ‘in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity’ (Acts 8:9ff.; 18ff.), and showed himself in the following decades to be the most determined opponent of apostolic Christianity. If we ask in what sense a man like that could have partaken of the Holy Spirit, the words which follow here may point the way to an answer.

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(d) *Tasted the Good Word of God (6:5a)*

...⁵ *and have tasted the goodness of the word of God...*

MacArthur: Again these readers are spoken of as having ‘tasted’ something of God, this time His ‘word.’ The Greek term used here for ‘word’ (*rhēma*), which emphasizes the parts rather than the whole, is not the usual one (*logos*) for God’s Word, but it fits the meaning in this context. As with His heavenly gifts, they had heard God’s utterances and sampled them, tasted them, without actually eating them. They had been taught about God. Herod was like this. In spite of the prophet’s hard message, including accusations directly against the king, Herod enjoyed listening to John the Baptist preach (Mk. 6:20). He was perplexed but fascinated by this dynamic preacher. He liked to sample the message of God. But when pressed into decision, he forsook God’s man and God’s message. He reluctantly, but willingly, agreed to have John beheaded. His taste of God’s Word only brought him greater guilt.

Hughes: Those who apostatized also ‘tasted the goodness of the word of God.’ The unregenerate commonly taste and benefit from God’s Word. King Herod did, for Mark 6:20 tells us he enjoyed listening to John the Baptist preach, even though John confronted him. He liked tasting God’s Word, but ultimately he rejected it and reluctantly acceded to John’s martyrdom.

Bruce: Simon Magus realized how good the word of God was when he heard it from Philip’s lips, and he was amazed at the signs and great ‘powers’ which accompanied the reception of the gospel, proclaimed by a man who was ‘full of the Spirit’ (Acts 6:3).

(e) *Tasted the Powers of the Age to Come (6:5b)*

...*and the powers of the age to come...*

Hughes: Lastly, the putative Christians experienced ‘the powers of the age to come.’ They experienced ‘signs and wonders and various miracles’ (2:4), not unlike their ancestors in the wilderness. And they saw even greater miracles in the resurrections of Lazarus and Christ and the mute given voice and the blind receiving sight—yet their unbelieving hearts were never regenerated and they fell away. Tasting the powers of the coming age proves nothing other than the fact that one has come under the blessing of the gospel! (cp. Mt. 7:22-23).

Bruce: Those ‘powers’ or mighty works were ‘signs’ that the age to come had broken in already on the present age. But Jesus also spoke of a day when many would say to him, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do mighty works in your name?’—only to be told, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers’ (Mt. 7:22ff.).

MacArthur: The ‘age to come’ is the future kingdom of God. The ‘powers’ of the kingdom are miracle powers. These Jews had seen the same kind of miracles that are going to come when Jesus brings in His earthly kingdom [DSB: Premillennial Warning!]. They tasted them. They saw miracle upon miracle. And the more they saw and tasted without receiving, the more their guilt increased.

(f) *Fallen Away (6:6a)*

...⁶ *and then have fallen away...*

Bruce: The Scriptures contain encouragement enough and to spare for the feeblest believer, but are full of solemn warnings to those who think they stand to beware lest they fall. A credible profession of faith must be accepted as genuine, but ultimately it is only the Lord who knows

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those who are His. For it is possible for people who can be described in the language of vv. 4 and 5 to ‘fall away’ irretrievably. The writer to the Hebrews himself distinguishes (as did the Old Testament law) between inadvertent sin and willful sin, and the context here shows plainly that the willful sin which he had in mind is deliberate apostasy.

Hughes: How is it possible for one to experience all of this and not be regenerated? we ask. Judas provides the answer. Very likely all the characteristics in our passage were part of his experience, yet there is no way we can imagine him as regenerate, especially since the Lord called him ‘a devil’ (Jn. 6:70), ‘the son of perdition’ (Jn. 17:12), and one for whom ‘it would have been better...if he had not been born’ (Mk. 14:21). Jesus knew Judas’ condition from the beginning, though Judas fooled the disciples to the last!

Phillips: Certainly, it is dire to think of a professing Christian repudiating the Lord. But we have the example of Peter as one who did deny Jesus and yet came back to faith and was made the leading apostle. Set against him is the example of Judas Iscariot who after long years in Jesus’ company—having presumably evangelized others and performed miracles in His name (see Luke 10)—came to the decisive moment of apostasy that resulted in his great betrayal. At that point Judas was lost, and despite his evident mourning over what he had done there was nothing left but death and eternal damnation. What is the difference between Peter and Judas? One failed in his fidelity to Christ, as Christians will and often do, while the other decisively repudiated Him. One did not live up to the cross, while the other despised it.

Phillips: How do people ‘fall away’? They fall away by doing what the Israelites did in the desert: by removing their trust in the Lord, repudiating His authority and the salvation He offers, and denying Him worship. The verb here is in the aorist tense, which in the Greek normally signifies a completed past action. So we have a decisive break that happened and is now accomplished. In the case of these Hebrew Christians, it is likely that apostasy would mean a return to Judaism and therefore a denial of the saving significance of Christ’s life and death, an action that was ominous in its terrible finality.

b) The Consequence of Apostasy (6:4a, 6b)

⁴*For it is impossible... ..to restore them again to repentance...*

Hughes: Why is it impossible? The answer is, *they have committed the unpardonable sin!* (cp. Mt. 12:32). The Pharisees who committed this sin fit well into the experience of the apostates of Hebrews 6. They had been ‘enlightened’ by their contact with Christ and His teaching (Jn. 3:11; 9:39, 41). They had inchoately ‘tasted’ of the heavenly gift in their beholding the spiritual blessings of Jesus’ ministry. They had been partakers in the work of the Holy Spirit in witnessing the significant deliverance of the crippled man. They had ‘tasted’ the goodness of the Word of God in both their knowledge of the Old Testament and in Christ’s teaching. They had ‘tasted’ the powers of the coming age in witnessing the miracles enacted before their eyes. But despite all these spiritual blessings, they attributed the miracles to Satan rather than God. If those who have been catechized and baptized and have become communicants, and have experienced spiritual realities reject Christ, it is all over. Repentance is impossible (cp. 2 Pe. 2:20-21).

Phillips: These are sober words indeed. The statement ‘it is impossible’ is unavoidable; indeed, as the first word in this whole passage it is greatly emphasized. This means that people in the church can ‘fall away’ by repudiating Christ, and that ‘it is impossible to restore [them] again to repentance.’ Those who have come to a true knowledge of the gospel, who have experienced the

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phenomena of salvation by means of their participation in the church, but who ultimately turn their back on Jesus Christ, cannot afterwards be restored to repentance. That is the unavoidable statement of this passage. The point is that the people described here are not able to repent and return to faith in Jesus unto salvation because of the hardening effect of their apostasy.

Schreiner: The ‘for’ (*γὰρ, gar*) explains why it is imperative that the readers progress on to maturity and do not remain spiritual infants. They are in a perilous position, for they are in danger of apostasy. The author warns them that if they fall away they cannot be renewed to repentance. ‘The pastor would not be issuing this warning had his hearers come to this terrible end. His exhortation is not counsel of despair but a timely wake-up call.’ The author addresses the readers pastorally and doesn’t assume a divine perspective of their ultimate fate. If the readers apostasize and turn away from Jesus Christ, there will be no opportunity of salvation for them. Is the writer saying that they can’t come back to Christ even if they wish to do so? If we think of the context of the letter, the readers were being persecuted and growing weary and exhausted with the trials of the Christian life. The author sees that they are at a crossroads. He perceives that if they turn away from Christ, there will be no future repentance for them. It isn’t the case that God would not and could not forgive them. Rather, the readers, if they repudiate Christ, will have no desire to return to Him. They will have left that ‘phase’ of their life behind. Hence, the urgency of the current situation provokes the author to admonish them severely.

MacArthur: Still speaking to the unsaved who have heard the truth and acknowledged it, but who have hesitated to embrace Christ, the Holy Spirit gives a fourth warning, the crux of 6:1-8. Summarized, the warning is: ‘You had better come to Christ now, for if you fall away it will be impossible (*adunatos*) for you to come again to the point of repentance.’ They were at the best point for repentance—full knowledge. To fall back from that would be fatal.

Schreiner: The language of renewing to repentance makes clear that the sin is apostasy. The danger isn’t simply that the readers would live unfruitful lives and thus not gain a greater reward. Repentance and faith are regularly used in the NT to describe the human response necessary to enter the people of God. So by saying that they couldn’t repent again, the author indicates that they would be outside the people of God if they fall away, that there would be no room for coming back in through repentance and faith. Such language precludes the notion that rewards are intended.

Bruce: It is indeed impossible to reclaim them says our author. We know, of course, that nothing of this sort is ultimately impossible for the grace of God, but as a matter of human experience the reclamation of such people is, practically speaking, impossible. People are frequently immunized against a disease by being inoculated with a mild form of it, or with a related but milder disease. And in the spiritual realm experience suggests that it is possible to be ‘immunized’ against Christianity by being inoculated with something which, for the time being, looks so like the real thing that it is generally mistaken for it. This is a question of people who see clearly where the truth lies, and perhaps for a period conform to it, but then, for one reason or another, renounce it.

Phillips: We always want to leave room for the sovereign power of God, remembering Jesus’ words to His disciples: ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible’ (Mt. 19:26). In fact, that is a vital distinction for understanding this text. The Greek text does not say, ‘It is impossible for those who...fall away to be brought back to repentance’ (NIV). Rather, as the ESV more accurately puts it, ‘It is impossible to restore again...[those who] fall away.’

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We are not able to restore them, but that doesn't mean that *God* cannot. Indeed, as long as the gospel goes forth, we should never despair of its power to save anyone. The point here is not to deny apostasy as a real and terrible situation, or to soften the writer's statement that true apostates are in a dreadful spiritual state. Rather, the point is that we should never stop reaching out to others with the gospel, even if they seem to have fallen away in the manner described by this passage.

c) *The Contempt of Apostasy (6:6c)*

...since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

Schreiner: If any fall away, they can't be renewed to repentance, for 'they are recrucifying the Son of God. The word 'recrucify' (*ανασταυρουντας, anastaurountas*) often simply means to crucify. In this case the nuance may be the lifting up to public shame. In context, however, the idea of crucifying again seems to be present. Those who abandon the Son of God can't be reconverted all over again, for that would be like crucifying Jesus all over again. Hebrews emphasizes the superiority of Jesus as God's Son, and hence the notion of crucifying Him again is particularly outrageous. A similar idea is expressed in 10:29 where believers are warned not to 'profane the blood of the covenant by which [they were] sanctified.' The severed of the language here also rules out 'the rewards' view. Jesus would need to be crucified twice if those who fall away were to be saved, but Hebrews is clear that He only dies once (7:27; 9:12, 27-28; 10:10), and they can't be renewed to repentance. Christ can't be crucified twice for them.

Bruce: People who commit this sin, he says, cannot be brought back to repentance; by renouncing Christ they put themselves in the position of those who, deliberately refusing His claim to be the Son of God, had Him crucified and exposed to public shame. Those who repudiate the salvation procured by Christ will find none anywhere else.

Phillips: We see why it is impossible to restore such a person. To repudiate Christ is, in effect, to take up hammer and nails and beat them into His hands and feet, to make common cause with those who crucified Him, to mock Him like the soldiers who laughed and sneered (Mk. 15:31). Interestingly, the writer here shifts to the present tense ('are crucifying') this represents a present and persistent state of affairs. What happened in the past has led to a present state of the heart analogous to the attitude of those who crucified Jesus in the first place, and that present state makes a future return impossible.

Hughes: This sin of apostasy amounts to 'crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding Him up to contempt.' They stand with the crucifiers. They treat Christ, in effect, as only a man.

MacArthur: Regardless of what they may still have been professing openly and publicly, they now took their stand with the crucifiers. In their hearts they said, 'That's the same verdict we give.' They had made trial of Jesus Christ and, with all the evidence possible, they decided He was not the true Messiah. They had turned around and gone back to Judaism. To them Jesus was an impostor and deceiver and got exactly what was coming to Him. They agreed with those who killed Jesus, and they put Him to an open shame again. 'Shame' here connotes guilt. They declared openly that Jesus was guilty as charged.

Schreiner: They also can't be renewed to repentance since they would be 'holding Him up to contempt' (*παραδειγματιζοντας, paradeigmatizontas*). The notion is parallel to recrucifying

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God's Son, for crucifixion in the ancient world was the ultimate expression of shame. To abandon God's Son is to say that His death didn't save, that it was for nothing. Or to put it another way, apostasy concedes that Jesus should have been crucified, that the penalty was warranted. Instead of finding salvation in Jesus' death, they reject it and thereby confess that the shame and dishonor Jesus received was deserved.

2. Straightforward Metaphor (6:7-8)

a) *Blessing (6:7)*

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.*

Schreiner: Verses 7-8 give an illustration of the consequences of apostasy. The writer asks the readers to envision land that has often received refreshing rain. If it yields crops useful for those who tended it, then it receives a blessing from God. The point of the illustration is clear. The land represents the readers and the refreshing rain the blessings God poured out upon them. In response to God's goodness, they should produce good fruit in their lives and persevere in the faith.

Phillips: There is one way to positively identify those who belong to Christ, but it requires time. We see this in verse 7-9, which provides an illustration that makes the matter much clearer. What matters is not whether or not rain falls upon the ground, for God sends rain on the good and the evil (Mt. 5:45), just as He does His saving Word. It is the presence of fruit that ultimately tells the tale (cp. Mt. 7:18-20). Truly regenerate, genuine believers can do terrible things, as Peter showed when he betrayed our Lord three times. The record of the church has revealed this over and over again. But a good tree—that is, one that is truly connected to Christ and has the Holy Spirit at work within—will necessarily go on to bear good fruit. It cannot do otherwise.

b) *Curse (6:8)*

⁸*But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.*

Schreiner: In verse 7 the author portrays a picture where good fruit appears because of refreshing rain. Now in verse 8 he looks at another situation where refreshing rain does not produce good crops. Instead 'thorns and thistles' appear. If thorns and thistles appear, even when there is refreshing rain, the land is 'worthless' and 'about to be cursed' and will finally be 'burned.' The language here resonates with themes from Deuteronomy, including the watering of the land (11:11; 28:12), its curse (29:27), and its burning (29:23).

Bruce: Such people are compared to land which, in spite of all the care expended in its cultivation, refuses to produce a good crop. The figure here is to much the same effect as Isaiah's vineyard song (Is. 5:1-7). That vineyard received all the attention that any vineyard could have received, but when the time came for it to produce grapes, it produced nothing but wild grapes. It was clearly reprobate land, which would never respond to cultivation; it must simply be allowed thenceforth to lie untended and become derelict.

Phillips: The bad tree simply lacks the power to bear lasting fruit unto God, however well watered it may be, however real its second-hand experience of salvation by virtue of affiliation

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within the church. Particularly under trial or hardship, it produces only thorns or thistles, and thus it is, as we read here, ‘worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.’

Schreiner: The purpose of the illustration is clear. The participle ‘produces’ (*εκφερουσα, ekpherousa*) is conditional: ‘if it produces.’ The writer addresses the readers, and hence the illustration continues the warning of 6:4-6. If the readers yield weeds in their lives after receiving God’s blessings, then they are ‘worthless.’ The word ‘worthless’ (*αδοκιμος, adokimos*) is regularly used in the NT for those who are disqualified on the last day, for those who will not be saved, but judged, by God (cp. Rom. 1:28; 1 Cor. 9:27; 2 Cor. 14:5-7; 2 Tim. 3:8; Titus 1:16). The HCSBs ‘about to be cursed’ (*καταρας εγγυς, kataras eggus*) captures well the meaning of the text. The author is not thinking spatially, as if they are near to being cursed but will actually avoid it. Instead, the expression has a temporal dimension. If one’s life is dominated by weeds, if one falls away, then the day when one will be cursed by God, the day of judgment, is coming.

Schreiner: The reference to the judgment is confirmed by the words, ‘and will be burned at the end.’ The author says the land will be burned, which applies to people who will be consumed on the final day. Those who think the text speaks of losing rewards instead of final damnation appeal to the illustration to support their view. But such a reading fails, for it is not the fruit that is burned but the land itself! It would make sense to see a reference to rewards if it were the crops that were destroyed at the end. The author, however, describes the destruction of the *land*, not its fruit. The land refers to the persons in the illustration, and hence there is no doubt that the threat is eternal punishment, not loss of rewards.

3. Simple Summary

Hughes: There could scarcely be a greater warning imaginable for church attenders who, although they have been taught and baptized and are communicants, are not true believers. Here a word is in order to those who fear they have committed the unforgivable sin. Concern about it indicates you have not committed the unforgivable sin and that you are still capable of repentance!

Phillips: Vital implications flow from this text. The first has to do with the nature of true and saving faith in Jesus Christ. Mere knowledge of the gospel is never enough. Understanding and even intellectually affirming Christian teaching is insufficient for salvation. As important as doctrine is, as knowledge of Scripture is, it is personal knowledge of and trust in Christ that alone constitutes saving faith. What does that say about your faith? Let me warn you that the church is no place for playing games, much less for indecision and loitering. When you hear the gospel and understand what is taught you incur an obligation to God to press on to saving faith. Hebrews shows that it is very dangerous to toy with such knowledge; by delaying you run the risk of a terrible fate. Furthermore, if you are not willing to turn to Christ for salvation today, what makes you think it will be any different tomorrow? (cp. 2 Cor. 6:2).

Phillips: A second implication is that the test of our faith is the fruit that we bear. Surely that is how this passage fits into the context of the overall letter. The author has been exhorting his readers to press on to maturity, and now he warns them that a failure to do so calls into question the reality of their conversion. How do we know someone is truly converted? We know not merely because he has made a profession of faith but because the power of the gospel bears fruit under trial. If you are content with merely drinking in the rain, but not concerned to honor God in your life, if you are unable or unwilling to hold fast to God and praise His name in times of

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trouble, then that is a very alarming sign that ought to provoke fundamental reflection regarding the state of your soul.

Phillips: One class of people described by the statements in verses 4-5, people who have knowledge and an experience of spiritual reality, is children who grow up in the church. How easy is it for them to reproduce verses and slogans they have been hearing all their lives, either to keep their parents happy or to merit their praise. But we must look for fruit in their lives, fruit issuing forth from their profession of faith. We must challenge them to give evidence of a heart commitment, to grow and advance in the faith, which is their only safety. Let us therefore pray diligently for our children and set an example not of spiritual hypocrisy but of real attractive faith.

Phillips: Our passage ought further to cause us to reflect upon what passes for evangelism in our time, and especially upon revivalism. The goal, it often seems, is simply to place people's names on a list, to increase the size of the congregation in the name of eternal security, to pat ourselves on the back and move on to the next 'convert.' When such people later repudiate Christ, whom they have never really known, they are left far worse off than they were before. Surely this passage tells us that evangelism and discipleship can never be separated, just as conversion is manifested and proved only by the bearing of spiritual fruit.

Phillips: This leads to a final consideration: what does this passage say about the idea of eternal security and assurance of salvation. The first answer is that it ought to make our statements more careful and sober. Reformed theology has traditionally and wisely shunned the use of 'eternal security,' but has instead emphasized the 'perseverance of the saints,' which is the emphasis of the writer of Hebrews. Where then, do you look for assurance? You can and should look to the unchanging character of God and the certainty of His promises. You can and should look to the once-for-all work of Jesus Christ which is sufficient for all your need. Do not look to yourself, to the strength of your faith, to the protection of various spiritual disciplines or methodologies, however useful they may be. It is not yourself or any regiment that depends upon human strength that assures your salvation, but God. Assurance is something that comes from the knowledge of God and of His promises, and is thus the result of the exercise of faith. The same is true of security; it is through faith alone that we are ever secure. Security comes from trusting in Jesus Christ, from persevering to the end in the power of the Lord.

Schreiner: Warnings and admonitions are integral to the proclamation of the gospel of Christ. The gospel not only provides comfort and consolation. Those who have received the stunning blessings of salvation, who have seen and known the power of the gospel, who have received the holy Spirit, are warned that if they fall away there will be no turning back. If they renounce Jesus Christ, after embracing Him and after tasting the power of God's word, they in effect crucify Him again. To receive such blessings and then to repudiate God's goodness leaves no other option but irrevocable judgment. Those who reject what is supremely good will find that they have welcomed evil, and it will be their destiny.

B. Assurance of Salvation (Hebrews 6:9-12)

Schreiner: The warning that began in 5:11 concludes with this paragraph. After admonishing the readers so severely in 6:4-8, the author now steps back and comforts them. He assures them that he is convinced they will not fall away but be saved.

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Phillips: Assurance of salvation is something we can have and should strive for, but it comes only through the active exercise of faith in Christ. That being the case, it is axiomatic that the only way Christians can have joy in our salvation and full assurance of hope is through practical godliness that flows from our relationship with Christ. The issue of confidence in salvation is on the mind of the writer of Hebrews. He has issued very severe warnings, and now he comforts his readers with grounds for their assurance.

Hughes: What is to be done pastorally, when, say, the preacher sees some dangerous drifts? The book of Hebrews issues terrifying warnings to the corporate church, hoping that those in the church who really need them will hear. The chilly warnings in 6:4-6, followed by the challenge of verses 7-8 to lay bare the soil of one's life to the sweet rains of God's grace, no doubt made some of the more sensitive believers in the church begin to question the validity of their own faith. Such questioning can be healthy, but there is also the danger of losing one's proper confidence in salvation. So in verses 9-12 the writer works at shoring up the confidence of the believing majority in the storm-tossed little church.

1. The Author's Confidence (6:9-10)

a) *Sure Salvation (6:9)*

(1) Beloved (6:9a)

⁹*Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved...*

MacArthur: 'Though we are speaking in this way' no doubt is meant to be an encouragement to fellow believers who, after reading the previous somber section, may have been wondering—as do many Christians today—if this warning applies to them. A paraphrased reading would be, 'Beloved fellow Christians, though we have been speaking about these awesome and fearful warnings to unbelievers, we know that far better things apply to you. You have the accompaniment of salvation, not of unbelief. These warnings to apostates, and potential apostates, are put in this letter to you because these people are in your midst.' [DSB Note: MacArthur's switch back and forth between addressees is awkward, to say the least. In his paraphrase, he says the warning doesn't apply to the addressees, only to the apostates in their midst, who are ostensibly addressees!]

Schreiner: The severe admonition is followed up by a word of assurance and comfort. As Koester says, 'The warning disturbs while the promise give assurance—but they serve the same end, which is that listeners might persevere in faith.' The author addresses the readers as 'beloved' only here in the entire book, reminding them that they are loved by God.

Bruce: Our author makes haste to reassure his readers, after his words of solemn warning: he does not believe that there are apostates, or even potential apostates, among them. His desire to reassure them, his concern that what he has just said should not discourage them, may have prompted his affection language here: this is the only place in the epistle where he calls them 'beloved'—his 'dear friends.'

Phillips: This pastor knows that his words in 6:4-6 will shake up his congregation, perhaps a little too well. So now he seeks to calm their fears as well as to assure them of his affection. He addressed them here as 'beloved,' which shows the tenderness of his pastoral devotion to them. Furthermore, despite the warning, he tells them he is not without encouragement for their spiritual condition; he is at least persuaded that theirs is a genuine and not a spurious faith. In

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verses 9 and 10 he gives two reasons for his confidence: first, what he believes about them, and second, what he knows about God.

Hughes: The author begins by tenderly expressing confidence in their faith, calling them ‘beloved.’ He is confident that the things that characterize a real work of salvation are part of their *inner* and *outer* experience.

MacArthur: ‘Beloved’ is never used in Scripture to refer to unbelievers. The term ‘beloved’ (*agapētos*, from *agapē*) expresses the highest kind of relationship. It is used sixty times in the New Testament. The first nine times it is used, it is used by God the Father in speaking of Christ His beloved Son. Everywhere else, whether referring to Jews or Gentiles, it is used only of believers. The writer was convinced that his fellow believers to whom he was writing exhibited all the traits, all the true marks, of salvation—of true sainthood in the biblical sense.

(2) Better Things (6:9b)

...we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.

MacArthur: Now he is speaking of ‘things that accompany salvation,’ whereas in the previous part of the chapter he had been talking only about things concerning revelation. Both of these things—the use of ‘beloved’ and the discussion of salvation conditions—indicate the writer’s change of audience. The previous topics—intellectual enlightenment about God’s Word, tasting God’s gifts and His Spirit, and so forth—accompany revelation, not salvation. They are meant, of course, to help lead to salvation, but they do not do so apart from faith in Jesus Christ.

Schreiner: Indeed, despite the strong admonition in verses 4-8, he is confident and persuaded ‘of the better things connected with salvation.’ In other words the author is confident that his admonition will have the desired effect and they will not fall away. The readers will take heed of what he has said so they will not apostasize.

Bruce: He was encouraged to believe and hope the best of them because the fruits of righteousness had beyond all question manifested themselves in their lives. Those fruits, being the natural concomitants of salvation, bore witness that the people in whom they appeared were genuine heirs of salvation.

Phillips: First he mentions their work. This points back to the contrast he drew between the field that produces a bad crop and that which produces a good and useful crop (vv. 7-8). He is able to say that he sees real spiritual fruit in the lives of his readers. This is something that accompanies salvation, and so it encourages him about their faith. This matter of bearing fruit is a serious one. Are your faith in Jesus Christ and your relationship with Him exerting an influence upon your character, so that you find yourself thinking and responding in a way that is less worldly and more godly? If not, then you should be concerned and should turn to God for grace.

Hughes: Inwardly, ‘things that belong to salvation’ are evidenced by the witness of the Holy Spirit as He testifies with our spirits that we are God’s children (cp. Rom. 8:16). We have a subjective voice within that authenticates our relationship with God. At the very root of this is the inner awareness that we are forgiven and reconciled. We also have an inner peace/*shalom* that is supernatural (cp. Jn. 14:27). These unique inward realities that characterize our experience of salvation are substantial grounds for confidence.

Hughes: Outwardly, ‘things that belong to salvation’ are witnessed to by the graces of character that come from truly knowing Christ: a pure life—a truthful tongue—a forgiving spirit—a

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generous heart. Authentic Christian life produces authentic Christian character—and such character is added ground for substantial confidence. When we have the inner and outer evidences of ‘things that belong to salvation,’ we have reason for great confidence.

b) *Serving Saints (6:10)*

(1) God Cares (6:10a)

¹⁰*For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work...*

Schreiner: The author explains why (‘for’) he is convinced that the readers will heed his warnings and be saved on the last day. He appeals to God’s justice. God will never forget the work and love of the readers manifested in their past and current ministry to fellow believers. God is ‘not unjust.’ He righteously rewards those who do what pleases Him, and final judgment will not be poured out on those who live righteously. How we live our lives matters, and God does not forget the righteous and loving actions undertaken for others. The past obedience of the readers signals that they have new life in Christ.

Hughes: Many in that little church lived an exalted Christian lifestyle, and if we look closer we see that it did not escape the notice of Heaven. They will be rewarded because in helping God’s people they were helping God! (cp. Mt. 25:37-40). Their caring lifestyle for others was ultimately a caring for God!

Bruce: The point here is that deeds of kindness done to the people of God are reckoned by God as done to Himself, and will surely receive their reward from Him.

Phillips: The second basis of the writer’s confidence has to do with God Himself. Some people read verse 10 and erroneously conclude that it teaches some kind of works-righteousness. Roman Catholic apologists cite these words to support the doctrine of the meritorious character of good works unto justification. We know from many other passages, however that such a view is alien to the Bible (e.g., Eph. 2:8-9). John Calvin sums up how we should approach verse 10 by noting: ‘The apostle is not referring expressly here to the cause of our salvation, and therefore no conclusion should be drawn from this passage about the merit of works.... It is clear everywhere in Scripture that there is no outer fount of salvation but the free mercy of God. The point of verse 10 is that God does regard our condition and treasures every petition of prayer, every deed of love, and every act of fidelity. With regard to the idea of rewards, the Scriptures teach that God will reward us for what we do in this life. Having been saved by grace alone, apart from works, we are now called to works. God, like any loving father, will reward the works we do for Him.’

(2) Christian Love (6:10b)

...and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.

Hughes: The writer was confident about the church in general because he knew most of them knew the ‘things that belong to salvation.’ But his confidence was grounded even further in their past and present lifestyle. The essence of their *past* lifestyle is noted in his saying, ‘serving the saints,’ a direct reference to their initial heroics when the church began, as recorded in 10:32-34. There we are told that they stood tall in the face of suffering public insult, persecution, and confiscation of their property. But even more heroic is how they unselfishly committed themselves to helping their suffering brothers and sisters. Their Christian lifestyle was one of daring courage and compassion—giving themselves for others. And this reaching out, this care

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for the Body of Christ, was not just a thing of the past but was part of their *present* lifestyle because the whole of the phrase reads, ‘...in serving the saints, *as you still do.*’

Bruce: The fruits of righteousness which have shown themselves in their lives are the acts of service performed for their fellow-Christians. The ‘holy people’ are as general here as are the ‘holy brothers’ of 3:1. As for the acts of service referred to here, further details of the circumstances in which they are rendered are given later, in 10:32-34.

Phillips: Spiritual fruit is important, but it seems that the writer of Hebrews especially had in mind particular works his readers had demonstrated in times past and would demonstrate again in the future. He chronicles these works in 10:32-34. This good crop of works points to real and saving faith; such works are not the cause of salvation but they surely accompany it. In particular, the writer of Hebrews focuses on the ministry his readers have shown to one another in the church as a good sign of real spiritual life.

Phillips: How do you show your love to God? You show it by coming to church to worship Him. You show it by making time in your day to read Scripture and pray, and by taking a stand for Him in the circumstances of your life. But, most tangibly, Christians show their love for God by their loving ministry to other Christians (cp. 1 Jn. 4:19-21). This is why the writer of Hebrews is excited to see that his people are busy helping one another. The Greek word here is *diakoneō*, from which we derive the word ‘deacon.’ Diaconal ministries are those that address the physical or temporal needs of the congregation and community, such as housing, financial assistance, and visitation of the sick. This is an important part of life in the church and a vital way in which we show our love to Christ (cp. Mt. 25:34-40). It is for this reason that practical love demonstrated in a congregation is a good sign of its spirituality. The writer of Hebrews sees in them things that accompany salvation and draws the conclusion that here must be real spiritual life. Where there is smoke, we say, there is fire; so also, where there is fruit there must be life.

Schreiner: The love evident in the readers’ lives was not merely horizontal. It revealed their concern for God’s ‘name.’ What animated the readers was the glory and honor of God. But they did not obey merely out of a sense of duty. They were inspired by love for God and love for His reputation. One of the key indications that one belongs to God is a genuine love for His name and His glory. Their vertical love for God expressed itself in practical ways. They served (*διακονήσαντες*, *diakonēsantes*) fellow believers in the past and are continuing to serve (*διακονοῦντες*, *diakonountes*) them.

MacArthur: Love for and service to the brethren is an evidence of salvation (cp. Jn. 13:34-35). But an even more significant evidence is love ‘shown toward His name.’ God knows when our service is truly for His glory by whether or not it is done out of love for His name. As important as loving fellow Christians is, loving God is immeasurably more important. In fact, without loving God first and foremost, we are not able to love each other as we should. The Jewish Christians being commended here ‘ministered...to the saints’ first of all out of their love for God’s name. The very reason they could love each other so much and serve each other so well was because they loved God so much. The key to true Christian service is a burning love for the Lord.

Hughes: Thus, the writer has a well-grounded confidence in the spiritual authenticity of his people. A lifestyle that caught the rewarding eye of God, which, in serving others, was serving Him—this lifestyle, coupled with the inner ‘things that belong to salvation’ plus the outer character changes coming from salvation, was substance for the author’s great confidence that

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the church would go forward. And it is the same with us. If we have undergone an inner change through Christ that affects us outwardly in our character, producing a lifestyle that causes us to care for others, we can have the greatest confidence about our faith. Conversely, if there is no subjective inner experience of *shalom*, if our ostensible character changes are more like plastic flowers and our lifestyle is focused inward upon ourselves, we had better take careful stock of our destiny.

2. The Author's Desire (6:11-12)

a) Showing Sincerity (6:11)

¹¹ *And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end...*

Schreiner: The author picks up the verb from verse 10, 'show' (*ενδεικνυμι, endeiknumi*), and uses it again in verse 11. They 'showed' love for God's name by ministering to the saints (v. 10). Now, he wants them to 'show' the same kind of diligence they had in the beginning until the end. Perseverance is necessary so that the hope they have now will be realized on the final day. The warning, therefore, is intended by the author to be the means by which they persevere.

Schreiner: The author wants the 'diligence' (*σπουδην, spoudēn*) that characterized their lives at the beginning to continue so that they will be full of hope until the final day. Assurance of faith is obtained through the activity of believers; they are not called to passivity or to laxity. They should be intentional and diligent in their faith (cp. 2 Pe. 1:5-11).

MacArthur: 'Diligence' (*spoudē*) can carry the idea of eagerness or haste.

Phillips: The author wants his readers to press onward in the Christian life, which is the duty of the Christian and the only way of salvation. Security in salvation comes only through perseverance in the faith, which is itself the result of God's preserving grace. But there is something more that the writer of Hebrews has in mind. He wants them each to show diligence in the faith, so that, literally, their 'hope might be filled up.' The NIV puts it, 'to make your hope sure,' and the ESV has 'to have the full assurance of hope.' But the verb here is to 'fill up,' so the meaning is that he wants them to have and know the fullness of the hope that ought to be theirs through faith. This is every true pastor's fervent desire for his flock, that His people would not press forward grudgingly, but would know the full assurance of their salvation, and therefore the joy and the peace that are provided for them in Christ.

Hughes: Those who work at their faith make their hope sure! The Bible is clear that no one can be saved by works, but it is also clear that saving faith works (cp. Eph. 2:4-10; 1 Cor. 5:10). Spiritual diligence is a sign that God's grace is really at work in us!

Bruce: But let them go on as they have begun. Our author's insistence on the grace of continuance appears again as he assures them of his affectionate longing that they should go on exhibiting the same zeal as marked them in the beginning, until the final and full realization of their hope.

Schreiner: It is difficult to determine whether the author speaks of 'final realization' (so HCSB, *πληροφοριαν, plērophorian*), understanding the term more objectively, or if the word has a more subjective meaning, such as 'full assurance' (ESV) or confidence. The latter reading fits with the boldness with which the readers are to approach God (4:16; 10:19), and with the use of the same word in 10:22 where believers enjoy full assurance since their 'hearts' are 'sprinkled clean

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from an evil conscience.’ Perhaps we don’t have an either-or here, so that the word designates but the subjective and objective dimension of assurance. Their diligence in virtue assures them that they belong to God, but it is also the means by which they will realize their eschatological hope.

b) Shedding Sluggishness (6:12a)

...¹²so that you may not be sluggish...

Phillips: What then, is the plan for this diligence? We see it in verse 12, which argues that we must not become lazy or swoon into a dull or sluggish faith.

MacArthur: ‘Sluggish’ is a translation of the same word (*nōthros*) that is rendered ‘dull’ in 5:11.

Schreiner: The readers’ spiritual ‘sluggishness’ (*νωθροι, nōthroi*, 5:11) precipitated the strong admonition and warning. The readers must be diligent so they will not fall prey to ‘sluggishness.’ For as we have seen, those who are spiritually idle are in danger of falling away.

Hughes: Here we see that the great enemy of perseverance is sloth or laziness—one of the seven deadly sins. The word behind ‘sluggish’ was used earlier in 5:11 to describe those who were ‘dull of hearing’—literally ‘sluggish in the ears.’ More often than not, sluggish ears go with a sluggish, lazy life. When the ear becomes dull, everything else follows suit. Spiritual sluggishness is a danger that looms over all of us if we do not work against it. A lazy life can be an indication of a graceless life. True believers persevere.

c) Imitating the Faithful (6:12b)

...but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Phillips: Instead, ‘[Be] imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.’ By imitation, the writer certainly does not mean that we simply go through the motions like robots, but that we look to the examples in the faith that walked before us. The writer of Hebrews plants here an idea that will blossom into full life in chapter 11. ‘[Be] imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises,’ says our author. This is great advice with regard to all those who have walked before us in faith. How much more is it true with regard to our Savior Himself. Through faith in Him, with patient endurance on the trail He blazed for us, we will inherit all that God has promised in Him. And we will come to know Him, to be His disciples, and to know forever the reality of His love, which is the greatest gift of all.

Phillips: The focus of this diligence involves imitation. The immediate context indicates we are to put our energies into imitating the faith and patience of Abraham, because it was by faith and patience that he entered the land of promise. Here in Hebrews ‘faith’ means the ability to take hold of the unseen and assume the promises of future blessings as our own (11:1)—and that is what the great faith chapter is all about. This idea of faith fits very well with the other dominant sense of faith in the New Testament, which is trust in Christ alone, because Christ is the revealer of the unseen things to us. But the major emphasis here in Hebrews is on imitating the posture of soul that sees the unseen and makes God’s promises to us by our own anticipation.

Phillips: Along with imitating the faith of Abraham, we are also to imitate his ‘patience’—or more accurately, his *long-suffering*. This long-suffering is not added to faith but is an integral part of it, because faith’s vision will produce patient tenacity. To the storm-tossed, persecuted little church that was facing mounting waves, the message was clear: fix your eyes in faith on the

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great unseen heavenly realities that await you; do so with long-suffering/patience; do this diligently, thus making your hope sure.

Schreiner: They should recover the eagerness of their former days as believers and imitate those who inherited the promises through ‘faith and patience.’ Here the author anticipates chapter 11, where he gives many examples of those who trusted God in the midst of their difficulties. The promises inherited here are eschatological so they will be obtained on the final day. But the promises are reserved for those who endure in faith. Initial ‘faith’ does not guarantee the reception of the promises if they do not believe until the end.

3. Summarizing the Author

Schreiner: The author mixes together encouragement and rebuke in the letter. Believers need warnings and admonitions to remain faithful, but at the same time they also need encouragement. The readers are reminded that their obedience is not trivial or forgettable. God notices what they do in their everyday lives. He knows whether they truly love His name, and that love is expressed in service for the saints. All believers should continue such love and service to the end. The Christian life is a journey that requires patience and continued faith. The reward of eternal life will not be given to those who drop out of the race. Retribution will be meted out for those who cease loving God and fellow believers. Hence we need to be provoked to be diligent until the final day. We must not give into spiritual torpor. The flames of spiritual life should be fanned by trusting the promises of God.

For next time: Read Hebrews 6:13-20.