
HB 6:4-12 : APOSTASY!

No. EE28

The letter to the Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who were growing tired of running the race of faith, and therefore considered turning back to Old Testament religion. The writer does everything in his power to dissuade them from such foolish, fatal action. The letter therefore contains five grave warnings against apostasy: 2:1-4; 3:7 - 4:13; 5:11 - 6:12; 10:26-39 and 12:14-29.

A closer look at Hb 5:11 - 6:12

❑ Some of the Hebrews are in danger of making shipwreck of their faith. Since they have tasted in wonderful ways the goodness of the Lord, they will have no excuses should they do so.

❑ Much is made of the addressee's knowledge of the truth. Although 6:4-5 speaks of imaginary people, it clearly alludes to the experiences of the Hebrews. They have repeatedly received irrefutable evidence about Christ.

Five experiences are mentioned: at one stage they were enlightened; they have tasted the heavenly gift; they have shared in the Holy Spirit; they have tasted the goodness of the word of God; and they have tasted the powers of the coming age.

❑ However, returning to the Jewish faith would amount to a rejection of Christ - and it would be impossible to be brought back to repentance again.

❑ *The sin against which they are being warned here is the conscious and calculated rejection of irrefutable evidence about Jesus Christ - as*

manifested over a period of time in their lives, and confirmed in their hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Possibly this is the same sin as that mentioned in Mt 12:31-32; Mk 3:28-30; Lk 12:10; 1Jn 5:16-17 and 2Pt 2:20-22.

What about the perseverance of the saints?

❑ What the writer says here makes sense. People who turn their backs on the Lord after so clearly experiencing His grace, deserve to be rejected. That we can understand and accept.

The problem comes when we compare what is written here to other truths which are strongly emphasised elsewhere in Scripture. What, for instance, about the Lord's assurance that He will forgive us if we turn to Him again in humility after we have sinned? And what about the clear Biblical teaching that the Lord will keep those who belong to Him to the very end?

Does the Bible not teach that not a single one of the elect will be lost? What about the Lord's explicit assurance in Jn 10 that the sheep given to Him as the good Shepherd by the Father will never perish? He does, after all, "give them eternal life". No-one can snatch them out of His or His Father's hand. They "shall never perish" (26-30).

❑ All this is true! *But the writer to the Hebrews does not think of those who forsake the faith as born again people.* In v.7-8 we have a short parable, connected to the preceding with the little causal conjunction, "for" (ESV; NASV). The parable therefore explains v.4-6 - and in the process solves the riddle of the previous paragraph.

The "rain that often falls" is a Biblical reference to God's blessings. In this case it refers to the experiences in v. 4-5. But rain falls on all types of soil. And while the land is still bare earth, it is impossible to tell what it will produce - useful crops or weeds.

Thus the difference does not lie in the rain that

falls, but in the type of soil. People who abandon the faith after experiences such as mentioned in v.4-5 produce weeds. *It is what follows after the blessing of the Lord that shows the true condition of a heart.*

❑ The Bible is very clear about the fact that there is an unbreakable relationship between the condition of a person's heart, and his or her lifestyle. Exactly this is the point of this short parable: *apostasy is simply proof that the heart has never been regenerated.*

Hb 6:9-12 confirms our conclusion. In spite of his warnings, the writer believes that his readers have indeed been saved and will accordingly not abandon the faith: "... dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case..." (9). What are these "better things"? The answer is given in verses 10 (their love), 11 (their hope) and 12 (their faith).

Better than what? Better than the experiences in verses 4-5! Why? Because love, hope and faith "accompany salvation" (v. 9b). For a long time already they have been displaying the irrefutable signs of true salvation - the only trustworthy signs!

Can the unregenerate experience this?

❑ Another question now arises: *Is it at all possible for the unregenerate to have the experiences described in Hb 6:4-5?*

Yes, indeed! Think of the many examples throughout Scripture. Think of King Saul. Consider Balaam, the New Testament's classic example of a false prophet (Num 24:15-19; 31:8, 16; 2Pt 2:15-16; Jd 11; Rev 2:14). What about people like Judas Iscariot and Simon the Sorcerer? Did these people not all have practical, in fact, remarkable experiences of the Holy Spirit's work?

Once we become aware of this fact, it is shocking to note in Scripture to what extent people can experience the Spirit's work - short of regeneration (cp. Mt 7:21-23).

❑ The respected theologian, John Murray, writes

in his classic work, *Redemption - Accomplished and Applied*: "The Scripture itself, therefore, leads us to the conclusion that it is possible to have very uplifting, ennobling, reforming, and exhilarating experience of the power and truth of the gospel, to come into such close contact with the supernatural forces which are operative in God's kingdom of grace that these forces produce effects in us which to human observation are hardly distinguishable from those produced by God's regenerating and sanctifying grace and yet be not partakers of Christ and heirs of eternal life. A doctrine of perseverance that fails to take account of such a possibility and of its actuality in certain cases is a distorted one and ministers to a laxity which is quite contrary to the interest of perseverance. Indeed it is not the doctrine of perseverance at all" (p.153).

What then is this sin?

❑ For at least two reasons we need to understand clearly the nature of this sin. Firstly, many devout Christians are plagued by the fear that they might be guilty of it. Secondly, thousands believe that they enjoy eternal salvation on the strength of a short prayer in which they "made a decision for Christ". To them "once saved, always saved" constitutes a free pass to heaven, irrespective of how they live after their so-called "conversion".

❑ The unforgivable sin has at least three elements:

- Firstly, this sin is committed by people who know in their hearts that Christ is exactly what the New Testament tells us about Him. They have often seen irrefutable proofs, and have experienced the convicting work of the Spirit. More than likely they have also seen the Lord's grace manifested in a living church.

- Secondly, this sin is committed by people who reject Christ knowingly, in spite of what they have experienced.

- Thirdly, it is impossible for such a person to be brought to repentance again. By this Scripture does not mean that the Spirit is unable to bring such a person to true salvation, but rather that those who minister to him or her will find it impossible to get through. A petrified heart is impenetrable!

Why is this so? Because the Lord simply withholds His illuminating grace. As a result such a person has no desire to be saved. But what about Esau who tearfully tried to rectify his foolishness (Hb 12:17)? His was not genuine repentance at the wrong he had done. No, it was mere sadness because a blessing had slipped through his fingers.

What this sin is not?

❑ This sin cannot be committed unknowingly. In Lk 23:34 the Lord Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing". In 1Tm 1:13 Paul writes that the Lord appointed him to His service even though he had once been a blasphemer and a persecutor ...". He was shown mercy "because I acted in ignorance and unbelief."

❑ People who genuinely desire peace with God and assurance of salvation can be sure that they have not committed this sin - because it leads to an inner hardening and an unconcern towards the Lord.

❑ Those who hear the gospel - even if this happens repeatedly and clearly - and still refrain from accepting Christ, cannot be said to have committed the unforgivable sin. Of course they are in sin, but if they have not experienced the deep convicting work of the Spirit, they are not guilty of this particular sin. Let anyone who has rejected Christ up to now, and is worried about having committed this sin, flee to Christ. If you approach Him with a sincere and broken heart, the Lord will certainly accept you.

❑ People who have said blasphemous things about the Spirit in unbelief, ignorance or plain

stupidity, have committed a grievous sin - and deep confession and repentance is necessary. But the unforgivable sin as such, it is not.

❑ Scripture warns us that our sin grieves the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:30), and that we can put out His fire (1Th 5:19). This has to be taken very seriously. But, once again, this is not the unforgivable sin.

Perseverance of the saints

According to Scripture there is a terrible possibility that people may move for a long time within the circle of the true church, and therefore within the sphere of God's grace - only to find in the end that theirs was a false faith. That is why John speaks of people who used to be members of the church, but then left because they never really were members of the body of Christ (1Jn 2:19). That is why Paul calls on believers to examine themselves whether they are in the faith (2Cor 13:5).

However, perseverance of the saints remains a glorious Biblical truth. But then the doctrine needs to be understood correctly: *God will empower those whom He has sanctified (i.e. separated) for Himself to persevere in holiness until the end.* And a holy life has but one watermark of authenticity: *obedience to the Word of God, from a sincere heart full of faith in Christ, driven by a passion for His glory.*

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