

APOSTASY IN HEBREWS 6:4-6

T. MATTHEW GREEN

The theological idea that has come to be recognized as “eternal security” is one that has been studied, discussed, and debated since the advent of Jesus Christ. The concept is one that seemingly arose as a response to the Old Testament theology of salvation by works. This “new” concept is based on the completed work of Christ and the grace by which he has saved humanity. The ideology states that, once a person has accepted Christ as savior, there is nothing that can remove, destroy, or change that person’s salvation status. That person’s salvation has become eternally secure in the hand of Christ.

There is the other side of the camp, though, that argues against this concept of eternal security. Those that adhere to this point will not go so far as to say that a person is saved by his or her works, but once salvation is completed there are measures to be taken to “maintain” one’s salvation. These measures would include actions such as staying in a right relationship with Christ, spending time in prayer and biblical study on a regular basis, and doing everything possible to abhor that which is evil and cling to that which is good. Again, the point is stressed that works do not save a person, but one’s salvation must be taken care of and not taken for granted.

The author of the book of Hebrews seems to weigh in on this ongoing discussion and seems to offer some type of middle ground. He seems to allow for the possibility of a believer to “fall away” from repentance, but he describes it as one that is the result of a long process. This paper will seek to explore the experiential nature of the believer that the author describes in Hebrews 6:4-6 and discuss the idea of the impossibility of returning to repentance once the believer has experienced a falling away.

This discussion must begin with an examination of the experiential level of the believer that the author of Hebrews describes. In describing these believers, the author uses three terms: enlightened (*φωτισθεντας*), tasted (*γευσαμενους*), and partakers (*μετοχους*). These words are very specific and detailed terms used to explain the depth of experience of the believers. They, in fact, describe the relationship of a Christian who has had a life-changing encounter with Christ. Witherington goes so far as to say that a “more fulsome description of a Christian would be hard to find in the New Testament.”¹ Bruce goes further to explain that the experience described in this passage is not a false experience that mimics the real relationship much like an immunization mimics the thing it is preventing. This is not even the description of a believer attached to true religion without any

¹ Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James and Jude* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 212.

experience of that religion. Rather, this is a description of a believer who has seen clearly where truth lies and has in some way conformed to that truth.²

Attridge relates the use of the term “enlightened” to later in the book (Heb 10:32) and explains it as a common image for the reception of the salvific message.³ Lane agrees with this assessment and also relates the term to 10:26 – “we have received knowledge of the truth.”⁴ Witherington takes the description of the term a little deeper and relates it to other passages in the New Testament. He writes, “In the first place the term *enlightened* is regularly used in the New Testament for those who have come out of darkness into the light and so have gone through the necessary conversion of the imagination and intellect (Jn 1:9; 2 Cor 4:4-6; Eph 1:18; 2 Tim 1:10; 1 Pet 2:9).”⁵ Enlightenment speaks of a change in the believer, not just a realization.

Heen and Krey point out that an early interpretation of this passage and, more specifically, the term enlightenment, refer to baptism. Ephrem the Syrian, in fact, translates the word *φωτισθεντας* as “baptized” rather than “enlightened.” With this translation, he sees the impossibility of a person to be baptized a second time. Theodoret of Cyr seems to agree with this interpretation stating

² F. F. Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT, Revised Edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 144.

³ Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (ed. Helmut Koester; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 169.

⁴ William L. Lane, *Hebrews I, 1-8* (WBC 47A; Dallas: Word, 1991), 141.

⁵ Witherington, *Letters*, 212.

that a person who has participated in “all-holy” baptism is unable to return and be granted another baptism.⁶ Lane, however, believes this to be an erroneous interpretation of the term *φωτισθεντας*. He notes that the correlation between baptism and the idea of being brought to light, illumination, or enlightenment is one that was not present at the time Hebrews was written, but one that appeared around the time of Justin and gained popularity in the second century Roman church.⁷ Attridge also attests to the later interpretation of *φωτισθεντας* as baptism.⁸ Therefore, it is less likely that the author of Hebrews was referring to baptism when he used this word, but that he was referring to enlightenment as the “regenerating work of the Spirit experienced by all true believers.”⁹

The author uses the term “tasted” (*γευσσαμενους*) twice in the description of the believer’s experience. This term is used, not in a physical sense, but to describe the act of experiencing something cognitively or emotionally.¹⁰ Witherington sees the verb as meaning to “genuinely experience” and relates it to

⁶ Erik M. Heen and Philip D. W. Krev, eds., *Hebrews* (ACCS New Testament 10; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 84.

⁷ Lane, *Hebrews*, 141.

⁸ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 169.

⁹ Randall C. Gleason, “The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8,” *BS 155* (1998): 62-91.

¹⁰ Definition of *γευομαι* in Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 195.

2:9 in which the author uses it to express Christ's experiencing (or tasting) of death.¹¹ It is deeper and more internally experiential than a physical taste.

Hughes has pointed out the tendency of some to relate, specifically, the first mention of "tasted" to the Eucharist. He notes that this interpretation would go well with the interpretation of *φωτισθεντας* as baptism. Essentially the two gospel sacraments are neatly placed side by side in this experiential description of believers.¹² However, much like the baptism argument, Hughes later notes that this interpretation may be erroneous as well. It is not until later centuries that the term "tasted" was associated with the Eucharist. He points out, in fact, that it was introduced by Teodorico when he related the tasting of the heavenly gift to John 6:31ff where Jesus refers to himself as the "bread of life given by the Father from heaven."¹³ Though it feels nice to relate these terms to baptism and Eucharist, the late introduction of these ideas seem to be something other than what the author intended.

The final term that the author uses to describe the experiential nature of these believers is "partakers" (*μετοχους*). Witherington relates this term to the "heavenly calling" used in 3:1 to describe the believer as a partner with Christ. He goes on to explain that having "shared in" the Holy Spirit is the "hallmark of

¹¹ Witherington, *Letters*, 212.

¹² Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 208-09.

¹³ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, "Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Peril of Apostasy," *WTJ* 35 (1972-73): 137-55.

being a Christian, as Hebrews 2:4 stresses, along with numerous other New Testament witnesses.”¹⁴ Many commentators see a correlation with this phrase and the laying on of hands mentioned in 6:2.¹⁵ The Holy Spirit is imparted through the laying on of hands, thus making the believer a partaker of the Spirit. Again, this term, like the others, describes a very experiential relationship between the believer and Christ.

Hughes speaks to the argument by Teodorico and Bruce that these three terms are offered in a sequential form representing the order of experience by the believer.¹⁶ This position, held by Teodorico and Bruce, is based on the premise that “enlightenment” refers to baptism and “tasted” refers to Eucharist. Essentially, the believer first experiences baptism, then is able to receive Eucharist, and, finally, is made a partaker of the Spirit through the laying on of hands. The caution in adhering to the views on baptism and Eucharist has already been discussed; however, Hughes also cautions against the adherence to a sequential order. He notes that there is no fixed pattern regarding the impartation of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts. At times, it happens before baptism while after baptism in other instances. It is also imparted with or without the imposition of hands depending on the particular account.¹⁷

¹⁴ Witherington, Letters, 212.

¹⁵ See Attridge, Hebrews, 170. Bruce, Hebrews, 146-47. Hughes, Hebrews, 210.

¹⁶ Hughes, Hebrews, 210.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The three terms the author of Hebrews uses to describe the experiential nature of the believer are quite detailed and paints a picture of an intimate encounter between the believer and Christ. Gleason points out a position held by some interpreters that the community of believers to which Hebrews is referring are not true believers. Rather, they are “merely professing Christians who, thought they have exhibited signs that often accompany faith, had in reality never expressed genuine faith.”¹⁸ He goes on describe the appeal of this view and its ability to avoid impugning the security of the Christian.¹⁹ However, in light of the recent examination of the terms used by the author, it would seem that this interpretation of the passage is off base. Rather, these Christians are genuine believers who have truly experienced a salvific encounter with Jesus Christ.

Now that the level of the believer’s experience has been examined, the next logical step would be to dissect the term “fallen away” used in verse 6. Bauer defines the root word used for “fallen away” (*παραιπιπτω*) as “to fail to follow through on a commitment, *fall away, commit apostasy*.”²⁰ The idea of failing to follow through on a commitment seems fitting for the Christian life. By acceptance of the free gift of salvation, the believer is, in essence, making a commitment to follow Christ and turn away from the flesh/sin. “Falling away,” therefore, would constitute the believer backing out of said commitment.

¹⁸ Gleason, “Old Testament Background,” 70.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Definition of *παραιπιπτω* in Bauer, *Lexicon*, 770.

It is interesting how many scholars and interpreters simply write off this idea or view it as hypothetical. Calvin strictly adheres to his ideas of the elect when dealing with this phrase by defining the group in this passage as those that are outside of the elect (in other words, reprobate). He states that “the elect are also beyond the danger of finally falling away; for the Father who gave them to be preserved by Christ his Son is greater than all, and Christ promises to watch over them all so that none may perish.”²¹ For Calvin, the elect are exempt for condemnation. Their repentance is final and their salvation secure. Therefore, the people to whom the author of Hebrews is referring are reprobates to whom God has shown grace and mercy. He continues:

I cannot admit that all this is any reason why he should not grant the reprobate also some taste of his grace, why he should not irradiate their minds with some sparks of his light, why he should not give them some perception of his goodness, and in some sort engrave his word on their hearts...There is therefore some knowledge even in the reprobate, which afterwards vanishes away.²²

Only the reprobate can be in danger of falling away, or losing knowledge, as Calvin explains it.

deSilva does not use the same terminology (elect/reprobate) that Calvin uses, but he shares the same principle as Calvin. For deSilva, the believer that the Hebrews author is describing is a person who has received God’s gifts and

²¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 137-8.

²² Calvin, *Hebrews*, 138.

has benefited from God's generosity, but not a person that is "saved."²³

However, according to deSilva, salvation is something that can only be attained at the return of Christ. Until that point believers are only working toward salvation.²⁴ Though his intention seems to be to exclude true believers from the threat of falling away, based on deSilva's definition of salvation, no believer is free of the threat until the return of Christ.

Wuest takes the idea even farther and describes the threat of falling away simply an empty threat. He assures us that "having fallen away" is "a conditional participle here presenting a hypothetical case, a straw man."²⁵ In essence, Wuest ignores the possibility of falling away all together. The threat is hypothetical and of little regard.

These arguments make sense if the people the author is describing have not had a genuine experience of salvation through Christ. The examination of the detailed and intimate nature of the definitions of the previous terms "enlightenment," "tasted," and "partakers," however, suggest that this is not the case. Rather, these believers have had a definitive, salvific experience. The adverb "once" (*απαξ*) comes into play here. According to Bauer it denotes a

²³ David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 221-2.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Kenneth Samuel Wuest, "Hebrews Six in the Greek New Testament," BS 119 (1962): 45-53.

single occurrence that is decisively unique – “once and for all.”²⁶ Worthington agrees and describes the term as carrying the connotation of something that is unique.²⁷ These are people that have not simply received the gifts of God as Calvin or deSilva may suggest; these are people who have had an unique and decisive experience with Christ.

This passage of scripture opens with the most disheartening word of all – “impossible” (*αδυνατον*). Bauer defines this term as “incapable of happening or being done, *impossible*.”²⁸ According to Attridge and Hughes, the initial use of the word “impossible” is forceful and emphatic. There is no reason to assume that there should be a weak translation of the term such as “it is difficult.”²⁹ The term, rather, should be translated as a simply “impossible” or “unable.” It will not happen. Attridge goes on to explain that this term is linked to the infinitive “to renew again” (*ανακαινιζειν*) in verse 6. The impossibility is in the believer’s return to repentance or renewal.³⁰

The impossibility of the situation begs the question: for whom is it impossible to renew the believer? Unfortunately, there is no subject of the infinitive offered in this passage. The text explains that it is impossible to renew,

²⁶ Definition of *απαξ* in Bauer, *Lexicon*, 97.

²⁷ Worthington, *Letters*, 212.

²⁸ Definition of *αδυνατος* in Bauer, *Lexicon*, 22.

²⁹ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 167. Hughes, *Hebrews*, 213.

³⁰ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 167.

but it does not offer the subject for whom it is impossible to renew. Verbrunge offers two contextual possibilities: God (*θεον*) or us (*ημας*).³¹ Verbrunge rejects the idea of God as the subject and invokes the words of Jesus in Matthew 19:26, Mark 10:27, and Luke 18:27 which speak of a God with whom all things are possible.³² This instance, therefore, cannot be implying God as the subject of the impossibility to renew. By elimination then, Verbrunge sees the subject as “us.” It is impossible for man to renew again once he has fallen away. deSilva seems to see the impossibility as an attribute of man as well. He suggests that even implying the impossibility of God would be an affront to him as the Patron resulting in the possible exclusion from future favor.³³ Hughes also references the idea that the impossibility lies with man and not with God; however, he suggests that because there is no subject, the infinitive is absolute.³⁴ In light of the Verbrunge and deSilva argument, though, attributing the impossibility to God seems to contradict the words of Jesus, thus making the impossibility of man the better interpretation of the passage.

To bring this argument back to the idea presented in the introduction, can a person’s salvation status change? Calvin, deSilva, and Wuest seem to think not. However, Worthington suggests that the idea of apostasy, as this passage

³¹ V. D. Verbrunge, “Towards a New Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6,” CTJ 15 (1980): 61-73.

³² Verbrunge, “New Interpretation,” 70.

³³ David A. deSilva, “Hebrews 6:4-8: A Socio-Rhetorical Investigation. Part I,” TB 50/1 (1999): 33-57.

³⁴ Hughes, *Hebrews*, 212-13.

seems to be addressing, is the result of a deliberate action by the believer. He states that in falling away (*παραπιπτω*) the believer is not accidentally or carelessly falling down, but that he is “deliberately stepping into a black hole.”³⁵ He goes on to explain that in the Septuagint this verb is used to describe an action that is faithless and treacherous. Continuing, he states that it is not against a dogma or idea, but against a person, specifically the Son of God, as mentioned in verse 6. Ultimately, apostasy is “the sin of abandoning God, Christ, and the fellowship of believers.”³⁶

In light of all of the evidence presented, it seems that the author of Hebrews is offering a warning to believers to beware of apostasy. For those who have had a definitive and intimate encounter with Christ and have chosen to deliberately abandon him and the commitment they have made to him, then it is impossible for them to renew again to repentance. The impossibility does not lie with God, but in the believer’s own ability to bring himself to a place of repentance. God will not take away a person’s salvation, but based on this passage, it seems that it is possible for a person who has been saved to lay that salvation down of his own accord in total rejection of Christ. Ultimately, the believer’s salvation seems to be secure from everything and everyone except himself.

³⁵ Worthington, *Letters*, 214.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Works Cited

- Attridge, Harold W. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Edited by Helmut Koester. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989.
- Bauer, Walter. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Edited by Frederick W. Danker. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Bruce, F. F. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Revised Edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.
- Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949.
- deSilva, David A. "Hebrews 6:4-8: A Socio-Rhetorical Investigation. Part I." *Tyndale Bulletin* 50/1 (1999): 33-57.
- deSilva, David A. *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews."* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.
- Gleason, Randall C. "The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8." *Bib Sac* 155 (1998): 62-91.
- Heen, Erik M., and Philip D. W. Krey, eds. *Hebrews*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament 10. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005.
- Hughes, Philip Edgcumbe. *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977.
- Hughes, Philip Edgcumbe. "Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Peril of Apostasy." *Westminster Theological Journal* 35 (1972-73): 137-55.
- Lane, William L. *Hebrews*. 2 vols. Word Biblical Commentary 47A-B. Dallas: Word, 1991.
- Verbrunge, V. D. "Towards a New Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6." *Calvin Theological Journal* 15 (1980): 61-73.
- Witherington III, Ben. *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James and Jude*.

Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007.

Wuest, Kenneth Samuel. "Hebrews Six in the Greek New Testament."
Bibliotheca Sacra 119 (1962): 45-53.