

The Point: A true relationship with Christ is seen in our perseverance.

Session Passage: Hebrews 6:1-12

Hebrews 6:1-3

Connection to the Point. We are commanded to grow in our faith.

Context. The writer of Hebrews emphasized that Christ is better than the angels (chap. 1), better than Moses (chap. 3), better than Joshua (chap. 4), better than Aaron (chap. 7), and better than the sacrifices under the law (chap. 10). Thus, in Christ believers have a better hope (7:19), a better covenant (7:22; 8:6), better promises (8:6), a better sacrifice (9:23; 12:24), a better possession (10:34), a better heavenly country (11:16), a better resurrection (v. 35), as well as something completely better (v. 40).

In the course of his long admonition to his readers, the writer included a series of five serious warnings (2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:14-29). Hebrews 5:11-6:12 is the harshest warning of all and concerns those who reject the only foundation for faith and thus will experience divine judgment.

Leave the elementary teaching (v. 1). The emphatic **therefore** links this passage to the writer's rebuke of his audience's spiritual immaturity in 5:11-14. With *leave the elementary teaching about Christ*, the writer was not encouraging his audience to abandon the basics of the Christian faith. Rather, with his words **let us leave and go on to**, he was urging them with the foundation having been laid to move on to spiritual growth which leads to maturity in the faith. He was also reminding them that the Christian life is a journey of stages.

Foundation of . . . (vv. 1-2) refers to "the elementary teaching about Christ." In the philosophical schools of that day, *foundation* was the common term for the elementary instruction or basic tenants on which the superstructure of a philosophy was built. **Not laying again** emphasizes that once construction begins on a structure on top of the foundation, the foundation cannot be laid again (see 1 Cor. 3:10-11).

The writer identified six truths, grouped in pairs, that make up the foundation or "the basic principles of God's revelation" (see Heb. 5:12). **Repentance from dead works** refers to turning in heart, mind, and action from all deeds that end in death and all attempts to earn salvation through one's own efforts (Rom. 6:21,23; 7:11). The writer used the expression *dead works* again in Hebrews 9:14 where he stated that when people are cleansed from dead works they are freed to serve the living God (see Rom. 6:22). Closely linked with *repentance* is the positive counterpart of **faith in God**. *Repentance* is a turning away from sin; *faith* is a turning to God in Jesus Christ to receive salvation. Furthermore, "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:6).

Ritual washings literally is "baptisms" (plural) and most likely refers to the differences between Jewish ritual washings and Christian baptism. In 9:10 the writer clearly used this term of Jewish ritual washings (see Mark 7:4).

The **laying on of hands** refers to the symbolic act immediately after baptism that signifies the reception of the Holy Spirit.

Regarding the final pair, **resurrection of the dead** likely refers to the end time general resurrection of both believers and non-believers, since that is directly followed by the **eternal judgment**. Believers and unbelievers alike will face a final judgment. Unbelievers will suffer the never-ending consequence of an *eternal judgment*, while believers will be judged on how they lived their lives after they received Christ and gain rewards for those actions done in Him (1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10; Heb. 9:27; Rev. 20:11-15).

These six phrases relate to the basics of Christianity—repentance of sin and saving faith in Jesus Christ, baptism, and the final judgment. The writer ended his encouragement for his hearers to go on to spiritual maturity with an

expression of both confidence and warning—**we will do this if God permits**. God does not always permit all to go on—as the writer warned in chapters 3 and 4 concerning the wilderness generation of Israelites and as he stressed again in 6:4-8. The only way these believers could grow to spiritual maturity was with the divine aid of God through Christ in the Person of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Gal. 5).

Hebrews 6:4-8

Connection to the Point. The work of Christ is thorough and saves us completely.

A Dire Warning (vv. 4-6). How one interprets the writer's strong statement—**for it is impossible to renew to repentance those . . . who have fallen away**—depends on how one understands the five great privileges he listed in verses 4-5. Does **those who were once enlightened** refer to true believers and their once-for-all non-repeatable conversion experience? Or does this refer only to those who have enjoyed the privilege of exposure to biblical truth? Using this same verb translated *enlightened*, the apostle John identified Christ as the one who gives “light” to everyone (John 1:9), but then stated that not all recognized or received Him (vv. 10-11). Significantly, the writer of Hebrews does not identify with this part of his audience; he transitioned from the first person pronouns in verses 1-3 (**us . . . we**) to the third person in verses 4-6 (**those who**). The initial declaration *it is impossible* is emphatic and forceful, indicating that repentance cannot happen again and thus is a dire warning.

Five Great Privileges (vv. 4-5). Those who (1) **were once enlightened** also had (2) **tasted the heavenly gift**. While this *gift* is not identified, suggestions include the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:45; 11:15-17), Christ Himself (John 3:16; 2 Cor. 9:13-15), God's grace of salvation (Rom. 5:15; Eph. 2:8), or the whole of the spiritual blessings of the church. But the writer did indicate its origin: it was *heavenly*, or from God.

The crux of interpretation as to whom the author was writing about in these verses relates to the word *tasted* (he also used this term of the fourth item in v. 5). Does this mean only “sampled,” or does it mean “to have fully imbibed” (see Ps. 34:8; 1 Pet. 2:2-3)? The same issue is involved with (3) **shared in the Holy Spirit**. Does the word *shared* refer to true possession and indwelling of the Spirit (as in 3:1,14) or merely to common association (as with those in 2:14)?

In this context, those who have *tasted the heavenly gift*, *shared in the Holy Spirit*, and (4) **tasted God's good word** most likely does not refer to those like Jeremiah to whom *God's good word* became the joy and delight of his heart (Jer. 15:16). Rather they refer to those who have sampled parts of the message of salvation, those who appreciated the outward attractiveness of the message—much as Herod enjoyed listening to John the Baptist preach but it made no difference in his life (Mark 6:20) and those who received the message of the gospel initially with great joy but in the end it never took root in them so as to transform their lives (Luke 8:13).

Many persons tasted of (5) **the powers of the coming age** by personally witnessing Jesus and His apostles perform miracles that were signs and wonders, but these witnesses were not saved. Judas Iscariot enjoyed all the special blessings and benefits of association with Christ and yet belonged to Satan (Luke 22:3; John 13:2). Indeed, Jesus Himself warned of persons who exercised *the powers of the coming age* but were not true believers (Matt. 7:21-23).

Fallen away (v. 6). This phrase has been understood in a variety of ways: as a warning to the truly saved that they could lose their salvation and never recover it; as a warning to Jewish believers not to return to Judaism; that the writer was only posing a hypothetical case of which he indicated in 6:9 that his audience could not be in; or as warning to those in the writer's audience who were merely cultural Christians of the dangerous situation they were in.

Recrucifying the Son of God and holding him up to contempt (v. 6). The writer articulated two reasons for his bold statement in 4a and 6a. If one were to fall away in this manner, a decisive and direct repudiation of God's grace—such would be *recrucifying the Son of God* and *holding him up to contempt*, that is, “to open shame” or

“public disgrace.” Both of these actions are present participles, indicating a continuous state—such people “keep on crucifying the Son of God” and “keep on holding Him up to contempt.” To hold that the writer was only saying that such individuals could not repent only as long as they persisted in recrucifying the Son of God and holding Him up to contempt ignores the finality of the statement and reduces it to a mere truism.

A lesson from agriculture (vv. 7-8). Using an agricultural image similar to Isaiah 5:1-7, the writer contrasted rain (representing God’s grace) falling on good ground **that produces vegetation useful to those for whom it is cultivated** and is **a blessing from God** with ground that **produces thorns and thistles** and **is worthless**, is **about to be cursed**, and **at the end will be burned**. *Thorns* and *thistles* recall God’s curse of the ground in Genesis 3:17-18, while the Greek term for *worthless* in the New Testament always refers to those who have turned away from God’s grace. Fire (to *be burned*) is a common symbol of God’s judgment.

Hebrews 6:9-12

Connection to the Point. Perseverance calls for diligently walking in Christ.

Two reasons for confidence (vv. 9-10). Evidence that the writer was addressing a different part of his audience when he stated **in your case we are confident of things that are better** from those who he addressed in verses 4-8 is abundant. First, he distinguished this part of his audience by the words *in your case*. Second, the writer made a significant change from his third person warning in verses 4-8 when he reverted back to using the first and second person plurals (**we . . . your . . . you**) as he had in verses 1-3. Third, the Greek term for **dearly loved friends** is used sixty-one times in the New Testament and save for one instance (Rom. 11:28) is never used of non-believers. Fourth, the writer associated these hearers with *things that are better*. Throughout Hebrews, the “better things” are associated with genuine believers. Fifth, the writer identified these believers with matters **that pertain to salvation**, whereas previously he had spoken of matters of “God’s revelation” (Heb. 5:12), falling away (6:6), and judgment (v. 8, “cursed . . . burned”). Sixth, the fruit this group produced bore witness that they were genuine believers.

The word for *confident* is emphatic (placed first in the original Greek for emphasis) and is a perfect tense verb, indicating the writer’s confidence was the result of considerable reflection and not a hastily arrived at decision. This confidence was based first on God’s faithfulness—**for God is not unjust; he will not forget**. Using a strong negative, he stated that there was no way that God would neglect or overlook either their **work** or **the love** they **demonstrated for his name**. Many might do works out of duty or to gain recognition, but these believers had done their good works *for his name*. What they did, they did for the glory of God.

The second basis for the writer’s confidence was this group’s faithfulness to God’s people. **Saints** are other true believers (see 3:1; 13:24). The writer’s audience’s love for the Lord prompted their service to the saints; and their serving other believers was a demonstration of their love for the Lord (see John 13:34-35; 15:12-14; 1 John 2:9-10; 4:7-8; 5:1). Such service was not done to earn salvation, but rather is the result of salvation (Eph. 2:8-10; 1 Thess. 1:3).

Diligence and perseverance until the end (vv. 11-12). The writer referred to the laziness, sluggishness, and dwindling enthusiasm of the true believers in his audience multiple times (5:11-14; 10:35-36; 12:1,12-13). Now he encouraged them to **demonstrate the same diligence** they had in the past in serving others and to embrace **the full assurance of your hope** that comes through living out one’s faith and persevere **until the end**. Producing the fruit of the Spirit that comes through living by faith gives evidence of the genuineness of one’s faith. Such certainty builds confidence.

Your hope refers to the completion of their salvation at the return of Christ (“the blessed hope” of Titus 2:13). *Until the end* emphasizes that true faith perseveres even if sometimes it wavers and needs encouragement and strengthening (Heb. 10:35-36; 12:1,12-13).

The writer knew his audience needed examples of mature believers they could imitate to help them be diligent and persevere (1 Cor. 11:1). He encouraged them to **be imitators of those who inherit the promises through faith and perseverance** (see Heb. 11). The Greek term for *perseverance* means “patience” or “endurance” and is a fruit of the Spirit (“patience,” Gal. 5:22; see also Jas. 5:10). Persevering until the end is the final proof of the genuineness of one’s salvation (Matt. 24:13).

Can a believer choose to walk away from salvation? Some Christians stress that if one can accept salvation then one can later reject it as well. However, using this passage to argue this point means also taking the warning seriously that “it is impossible to renew to repentance those who were once enlightened . . . and who have fallen away” (Heb. 6:4a,6a). If one concludes true believers can lose their salvation, then one must also conclude that once such individuals have left the faith they are out forever.

In addressing this question, a sound principle of biblical interpretation is not to draw conclusions from isolated statements made in only one or two biblical passages. Rather, one must look at the whole body of Scripture and its teachings including the words of Jesus (John 10:27-30) and those of the apostle Paul (Rom. 8:28-39; Phil. 1:6). When this is done, it must be concluded that those who genuinely place their faith in Christ are eternally secure through God’s grace and power.