

Having Done All These Things: Brief Comments on Hebrews 6:4-6a

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Traditionally there have been two schools of thought on Hebrews 6. One school, committed to the doctrine of "once-saved-always-saved" (which maintains that a Christian cannot lose his eternal life), regards those in the passage as mere professors (instead of possessors) of faith. This school of thought says that, while those in the passage may be close to trusting in Christ for eternal life, they have yet to do so and are in danger of falling away. The other school, denying the doctrine of "once-saved-always-saved," regards those in the passage as real Christians who had eternal life but either subsequently lost it or at least are in danger of losing it. I share with the first school of thought the doctrine that a Christian cannot lose his eternal life. But I disagree with them in thinking that those in the passage are not true Christians. With this in mind, I wish to propose a *tertium quid* and argue that those in the passage are real Christians who have eternal life, who fall away (or are in danger of falling away), and yet do not forfeit that eternal life.

The passage in question says in the Greek:

(4) Αδύνατον γὰρ τοὺς ἀπαξ φωτισθέντας, γευσαμένους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου καὶ μετόχους γενηθέντας Πνεύματος Ἁγίου (5) καὶ καλὸν γευσαμένους Θεοῦ ῥῆμα δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος (6) καὶ παραπεσόντας, πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν εἰς μετάνοιαν ...

A literal, if cumbersome, translation might be:

⁴[It is] impossible for the [ones] once having been enlightened, having tasted and of the gift of the heavenly and sharers having become of Spirit Holy ⁵and good having tasted of God word powers and of coming age ⁶and having fallen away, again to renew into repentance ...

The Writer is Referring to Christians

Perhaps the biggest hindrance to understanding the passage is the unwarranted insertion at the beginning of v. 6 in some English translations of the word 'if' before the expression 'fall away.' It is important to note that there is no conditional in the Greek. The term παραπεσόντας

(*parapesontas*)¹ is an aorist participle just like 'enlightened' (φωτισθέντας, *phōtisthentas*), 'tasted' (γευσάμενους, *geusamenous*), 'become' (γενηθέντας, *genethentas*), and 'tasted' (γευσάμενους, *geusamenous*, second occurrence). All should be translated with the idea of "having" in the sense of "having been enlightened," "having tasted" (twice), and "having become." Thus παραπεσόντας should be translated "having fallen away." The sense is that it is impossible to renew those to repentance who have done all these things. It is not saying that it is impossible for those who have done the first four things to be renewed to repentance *if* they should fall away, as if there is some doubt whether they have or could fall away.

Two of the descriptions in this passage are used elsewhere in Hebrews to describe the Christians readers. The first term is φωτισθέντας (*phōtisthentas*).² It should be translated "having been enlightened." Heb. 10:32 describes the readers as having been enlightened. But clearly the writer regards his readers as believers. He calls them "brethren" (3:12; 10:19; 13:22) and "holy brethren" (3:1). Further, the writer says that his readers are sanctified (10:10) and that they "have a better and an enduring possession ... in heaven." Thus, their "having been enlightened" in 10:32 is because they are believers. If a believer is one who has been enlightened, then the ones who have been enlightened in 6:4 are believers.

My argument here is not that φωτίζω (*phōtidzō*) is always a reference to someone having been saved. John 1:9 might be a reference to the fact that there is a sense that every person is enlightened. Each one is either enlightened by salvation or by the conviction of sin. (John 3:19; 9:39; 16:8) But the context of the use of φωτισθέντες in Hebrews 10 seems to indicate that this enlightenment has eventuated in their having been saved. In like manner, the enlightened ones in

¹ παραπεσόντας (par-a-pes-on'-tas), accusative masculine plural, 2 aorist participle of παραπίπτω (par-a-pip'-tō), "I fall away"

² φωτισθέντας (pho-tis-then'-tas), accusative masculine plural, 1 aorist passive participle, from φωτίζω (pho-tid'zō), "I give light"

chapter six can only be people that the writer is trying to describe as those who are saved. It is precisely because the writer describes his Christian readers as having been enlightened that one should expect the writer to have his readers take the enlightened ones in Hebrews 6 as having been saved as well.

The next term is μετόχους (*metochous*) which is translated "partakers."³ The word here has the idea of *sharing or participating in*, and as a substantive means "a partner, companion."⁴ Heb. 3:1 uses this term to describe the readers' partaking of the heavenly calling. The term is also used in Heb. 12:8 to describe the readers' partaking of the Lord's chastening. Taking this term in the participial phrase in which it occurs (μετόχους γενηθέντας, *metochous genethentas*), it should be translated "having become partakers."⁵ This same phrase is used in Heb. 3:14 to describe the readers' partaking of Christ. The writer recognizes that his readers have partaken of Christ which surely describes only a Christian. It should be equally as clear, then, that only a Christian can be described as a partaker of the Holy Spirit as described here in chapter six.

Some interpreters try to weaken the notion of γευσάμενους (*geusamenous*, occurring twice)⁶ "having tasted" as if it was saying that the readers might be only partially acquainted with "the heavenly gift" and "the good word of God and the powers of the age to come" as if to say that they merely sampled something but had not eaten of it. However, the term means "taste, partake of, enjoy" and in a figurative sense "to come to know."⁷ Further, the same term is used in

³ μετόχους (met-o'-chous), accusative plural of μέτεχος (met'-e-chos), "a partner, companion"

⁴ William Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v., μέτοχος, p. 514.

⁵ γενηθέντας (gen-ā-then'-tas), accusative masculine plural 1 aorist passive participle, from γίνομαι (gin'-o-mai), "I become"

⁶ γευσάμενους (geu-sa-men'-ous), accusative masculine plural, 1 aorist participle of γεύομαι (geu'-o-mai), "I taste"

⁷ Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, s.v., γεύομαι, p. 157.

Heb. 2:9 to describe Jesus' relation to the death that He died for everyone. But surely it was not the case that Jesus only sampled or was only partially acquainted with death but rather, Jesus experienced death fully. Thus, the ones being described here have partaken of and enjoyed "the heavenly gift" and "the good word of God and the powers of the age to come." This is surely not a description of non-Christians. Thus, on the basis of these considerations, it seems clear that the ones being referred to are Christians.

Resolving the Apparent Problems in the Text

For those interpreters who come to this text with the assumption that it is not possible for a Christian to lose his eternal life (of which I am one), the passage seems to pose several problems. First, how is it possible for a Christian to fall away? Second, what does being renewed to repentance mean? Third, how is it that it is impossible to renew such ones to repentance? Fourth, how can it be that those Christians can be described as those who "crucify again for themselves the Son of God, put Him to open shame ... rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned"?

How is it possible for a Christian to fall away?

Probably one of the main reasons why Christians who hold that one cannot lose his eternal life insist that a Christian cannot fall away is that they falsely assume that to fall away means to lose one's eternal life. This is especially the case when it comes to the use of such phrases as "apostasy" or "falling from grace." There are several reasons why this notion of falling away here is not problematic for those of us who hold that a Christian cannot lose his eternal life.

First, there is no reason to grant that eternal life is even in question in this passage. The assumptions we bring to a passage often have a lot to do with confining the interpretive options we think we have with the passage. It is a mistake to assume that the notion of falling away

always (or ever) has anything to do with losing one's eternal life. The writer on several occasions encourages his readers to maintain and hold fast. (3:6, 12-15; 6:11-12; 10:23-25) The passage here in chapter six is clearly a case where some have not done so.

Second, there are other instances in the New Testament where the Christian is described as falling in some sense.⁸ In 1 Cor. 9:27 Paul acknowledges the possibility that he could be disqualified. In 1 Tim. 1:18-20 Paul describes some who, because of false teaching, have suffered a shipwrecked faith. In 2 Tim. 2:17-18 Paul describes some who, again because of false teaching, have had their faith overthrown. In James 5:19 James describes one among the brethren who can avoid having his life saved from death.

Thus, for the human being, there are two issues at stake: whether one has eternal life and whether the one who has eternal life has rewards. What is at stake for the Christian when it comes to the warnings in scripture such as the one here in Heb. 6 about the danger of falling away from the faith or into sin are the issues of temporal judgment in this world, the judgment of our works in the next world, and the gaining or losing of reward in Heaven.

What does being renewed to repentance mean?

Even though this passage is talking about Christians, there is no reason to think that the issue being discussed here has anything to do with one's eternal life. This puts this passage off limits to those who try to argue that a Christian can lose his eternal life. Repentance is certainly something that a Christian can do. (Luke 17:3-4; 2 Cor. 7:9) The writer was concerned that, after all his readers had experienced in the Lord in terms of their salvation, if that was not enough to keep them faithful, then nothing else, short of God's power itself, possibly could.

⁸ Some have taken these and other verses to argue that it is indeed possible for a Christian to lose his eternal life. At this point I am not trying to defend the notion that a Christian cannot do so. I am assuming that point for the sake of my overall argument that there is no reason for those of us who do hold this position to avoid admitting that Heb. 6 is a warning to Christians.

The stern warning is that if one of God's children falls away, there awaits him the awesome and terrible chastening and judgment of God, the extent of which could possibly result in his own physical death. It is clear that the Christian who falls into sin can experience the chastening of the Lord. Chastening is for the purpose of restoration. (Heb. 12:7-11) The imagery here in Hebrews 6 of the thorns and briars is reminiscent of the curse in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve fell into sin. (Gen 3:18) The imagery of burning and fire is too often associated by interpreters as references to eternal hell. However, fire can also refer to the judgment that can await a Christian. Perhaps the clearest and most direct reference to the judgment of fire that pertains to the Christian is 1 Cor. 3:12-15. Further, the metaphor of the burning of the fields had to do with the practice of burning the briars in a field in order to restore the field to a crop bearing capacity. The burning of the field was not intended to destroy the field.⁹

Physical death is also a possibility. Ananias and Sapphira died because of their sin. (Acts 5:1-11) Some of the sinning Corinthian believers had died due to their sin. (1 Cor. 11:30) James warns about the danger of death for one who sins. (James 2:14; 5:19-20) John warns about the danger of death for one who sins. (1 John 5:16-17)

Just as not every reference to judgment or death has to do with eternal judgment in hell, likewise not every reference to salvation and its cognates has to do with eternal life. Several passages talk about salvation in the sense of preserving the physical life, as, for example Acts 27:31. I contend that Heb. 6:9 is not talking about eternal salvation in heaven but rather is talking about the preserving of the physical lives of those Christians who either do not fall away in the

⁹ Zane Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege A Study on Faith and Works*. Dallas: Redención Viva, 1981, 71.

first place or who, because of God's chastening, repent of their sins and are restored. (cf. 2 Cor. 2:6-8)

The problem with taking all these passages that talk about judgment as if they are warnings to false professors (i.e., to those who are not really saved in the first place) is that we eliminate from the Scriptures the proper warnings that we as Christians would do well to heed. If every time a warning is given about the possibility of falling, one concludes that the passage is not talking about the Christian, then to the extent that this person has full assurance of his own eternal life, to that extent he dangerously dismisses all these warnings as irrelevant to himself.

How is it that it is impossible to renew such ones to repentance?

The term 'impossible' (ἀδύνατον, *adunaton*) clearly refers to the infinitive 'to renew' (v. 6). As an adjective, it can occur with or without the verb to be (εστί, *esti*) and is translated "It is impossible." However, for whom it is impossible is not necessarily expressed in the context. Does the text mean that it is absolutely impossible even for God or does the text mean that it is merely impossible for man to renew himself or for perhaps others to renew him? Compare, for example, Jesus' comments in Mt. 19:26 when He was queried directly about the possibility of who could be saved. Jesus said, "With men this is impossible (ἀδύνατον), but with God all things are possible." Therefore, whether the writer of Hebrews here intends the impossible to be taken absolutely or only regarding men is a judgment call the interpreter has to make. If the reference to the burning is indeed a use of the burning of the fields metaphor as I have suggested, then it seems reasonable that the repentance is not impossible for God to effect.

How can it be that those Christians can be described as those who "crucify again for themselves the Son of God, put Him to open shame ... rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned"?

The language here is indeed severe. It can only bespeak of the gravity of a Christian's falling away. But again, there is nothing in the language that references any eternal judgment. Rather, the ones whose "end is to be burned" are reminiscent of those occasions where God physically destroyed people by fire. (Lev. 10:2; Num. 11:1; 16:35). Indeed, the Lord is described as a consuming fire. (Ex. 24:17; Deut. 4:24; 9:3)

The severity of falling back into the shadows of Judaism for those who have experienced the reality of salvation in Christ is morally akin to crucifying the Son of God a second time. This is so because of all people, the Jews who were reared on the shadows should know better the superiority of the reality to which the shadows had pointed. Having experienced both, it is shameful for them to return to the shadows from that reality. Such ones are in danger of a most severe chastening from his Lord.

Again, however, there is no need to take the imagery of being cursed and burned as a reference to eternal damnation. As I have argued above, this imagery is completely consistent with the chastening from the Lord exacted on those of His children who fall into grievous sin.

Conclusion

While I celebrate those fellow Christians who defend the doctrine that a Christian cannot lose his eternal life, one must be careful when bringing this assumption to a passage not to overreact and assume that a given passage is even threatening this truth. The doctrine of the possibility of experiencing God's chastening and judgment in this life and the doctrine the possibility of gaining and losing reward in the next life are too often neglected in some evangelical circles. It is important that we who understand the security of the believer nevertheless recognize that the Bible gives stern warnings to us of the dangers of lurking sin,

especially when we are tempted to give in under persecution. It is hoped that such warnings will be the very thing that strengthens us to remain faithful when nothing else does.

For Further Reading

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