

Is it Possible For a Saved Person Ever to be Lost?

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For as touching those who were once enlightened and tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the age to come, and then fell away, it is impossible to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame. (Hebrews 6:4-6)

This is, by all accounts, the most difficult passage in the Bible for an interpreter to handle, regardless of his theological position. Dr. R.W. Dale, one of the great minds in the earlier field of conservative scholarship, wrote: "I know how this passage has made the heart of many a good man tremble. It rises up in the New Testament with a gloomy grandeur, stern, portentous, awful, sublime as Mount Sinai when the Lord descended upon it in fire, and threatening storm-clouds were around Him, and thunderings and lightnings and unearthly voices told that He was there." Every reverent person has come to this particular passage of Scripture with awe and wonder, and every sincere person has come to this passage with a sense of inadequacy — and certainly that is the way in which we now approach it.

In moving into the heart of a study of these verses, we are immediately confronted with the amazing fact that commentators, generally, have avoided this chapter. Even such a man as Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, the prince of expositors, has completely bypassed it in his book, *God's Last Word to Man*. However, when we do come upon the interpretations available and summarize each, we can well understand why men have chosen to remain clear of this scene of confusion.

Several Interpretations

In the interest of an honest search for the evident meaning of these verses, let us examine some of the interpretations.

In the first interpretation — to me the most unsatisfactory of all given — the teaching suggested is that the Christians mentioned are lost. That is, they were once saved but then lost their salvation.

There are many who hold that position and, for the most part, they are real born-again Christians themselves. But, in holding this position, they are just as uncomfortable in this belief as I am when making a trip by plane. Now I am just as safe on that plane as anyone there, but I do not enjoy it as does the pilot. There are many folk today who are not sure about their salvation; therefore, they are not enjoying it. Nevertheless, they are saved if they have fixed their trust in Christ as their Savior.

The folks in this general category of interpretation turn to this passage of Scripture more than any other since they deny that we have a sure salvation which cannot be lost and that the believer is safe in Christ.

But let me state that we *do* have a sure salvation, and Scripture is abundantly clear on that point. Paul said in Romans 8:1,

There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.

And, my friend, he expanded that great truth to the triumphant climax of such a bold statement as,

Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth.
(Romans 8:33)

The Throne of God is back of the weakest, humblest man who has come to trust Christ, and there is not a created intelligence in God's universe who can bring a charge against one of these who is justified through faith in His blood.

Paul continued in verses 34-37 of Romans 8:

Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ Jesus that died, yea rather, that was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. (v. 34)

Drink these verses into your very soul as the words of Paul build this mighty wall of assurance!

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Even as it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we were accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.
(vv. 35-37)

And if further assurance be needed, read verses 38 and 39:

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Here we are given the guarantee that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing that is seen, nothing that is unseen, nothing that is natural, nothing that is supernatural can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

The Lord Jesus Himself made this tremendous statement of our absolute security:

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who hath given them unto me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. (John 10:27-29)

Thus it becomes a question, not of our ability to hold onto Him, but of His ability to have secure hold on us. My friend, He said with the infinite wisdom and full authority of the Godhead that He *can* hold us and that they who trust in Him shall *never* perish.

Is your hope fixed in a God who is all-powerful or in a God who may suffer defeat?

The preceding passages are only a few of the many clear-cut statements of the keeping power of our Lord. Here is a rule that folk need to know: Never use a doubtful passage of Scripture to contradict a clear-cut passage of Scripture. This section of Hebrews 6 that we have under discussion is doubtful only because of the interpretations that have shrouded it with confusion.

This brings us to another interpretation in which there is a great deal of merit. It is held by those who contend that these verses in Hebrews present a hypothetical case.

In the Authorized King James Version, Hebrews 6:6 reads, “*If they shall fall away*” — and this “if” is just an “if” of possibility. That is, the writer here did not say that it happens, but “if” it were possible. Those who hold to this interpretation say that it is the “biggest if” in the Bible, and to that we say a hearty *amen!*

But the interesting thing is that there really is no “if” in the Greek. It is a participle and can be translated “having fallen away.”

There is also merit to the interpretation that the ones to whom the writer refers are “professors” (they “profess” to be Christians) but are not genuine believers. Personally, I cannot accept this view though such scholars as Matthew Henry, Dr. Grant and Dr. John Darby hold this thinking, as does Dr. C.I. Scofield in his excellent Reference Bible. However, I do not feel the interpretation given in his notes is the final interpretation of this passage.

My beloved, there are passages in Scripture that refer to “professors” who are not genuine believers. Peter, for instance, referred to this general type when he said:

It has happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog turning to his own vomit again, and the sow that had washed to wallowing in the mire. (2 Peter 2:22)

These are not genuine believers.

But in Hebrews 6 we find genuine believers, because they are identified in many ways that indicate them as such. Let’s move back into chapter 5 and get the entire passage. You will notice that Hebrews 5:11 states that these people are “dull of hearing.” That is different from saying they are dead in trespasses and sins, which is how Ephesians 2:1 describes the unsaved.

Then we have this:

For when by reason of the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need again that some one teach you the rudiments of the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of solid food. (Hebrews 5:12)

Beloved, an unsaved person does not need milk. What he needs is life, since it is only after you are born that you need milk.

Then in verse 13, the writer of Hebrews calls them babes, for he says that everyone that uses milk is inexperienced in the word of righteousness and is therefore a babe. And finally, “wherefore leaving the doctrine of the first principles of Christ” (Hebrews 6:1) urges these believers not to make a stopover at the commencement of the Christian experience, but to press on into a life of fruitfulness. An unbeliever has certainly never experienced a beginning and does not have a foundation in Christ at all. “For other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11).

Then Hebrews 6:4 reads:

For as touching those who were once enlightened and tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit.

This language clearly speaks of born-again folk. But there are those who take the position that the ones spoken of here are the Jewish people. For instance, if they were enlightened and tasted

And then fell away, it is impossible to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh. (Hebrews 6:6)

Those who hold this reasoning say that the writer was talking to Jewish Christians and warning them about returning to the sacrificial system, for in so doing they were returning to that which would crucify the Lord Jesus Christ. We will follow that line a little later on.

There is still another interpretation that stresses the word “impossible” as in, “It is *impossible* to renew them — the thought being that it is impossible for man, but it is not impossible with God. The Lord Jesus said that it is harder for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven than it is for a camel to go through a needle’s eye (Luke 18:25). That, of course, is physically impossible. Now while it is certainly *humanly* impossible for a man to be saved, it is not *divinely* impossible, and they put the emphasis there.

Another Interpretation

Among all the many interpretations of this passage, there is one that has been a real blessing to my heart, and I trust that you will follow me patiently, thoughtfully, and without bias as we look at it.

I would not have you gain the impression that this interpretation is original with me. In fact, it comes from Dr. J. B. Rowell of the Central Baptist Church in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Since this has been such a blessing to me, I want to pass it on to you.

First of all, Dr. Rowell notes that the writer to the Hebrews was not discussing the question of *salvation* at all. The whole tenor of the text reveals that he was speaking of *rewards* that are the result of salvation; he was talking about the fruit of salvation and not about salvation itself. The key verse, therefore, is:

But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak. (Hebrews 6:9)

Speaking of the fruit of the Christian’s life and the reward that comes to him as the result, he discussed the possibility that — because of their manner of life — there was a danger of their losing their reward.

Now let us see if the Bible confirms that interpretation at all, for we know that Scripture deals with these two great subjects of salvation and rewards. Paul, in his letter to the young preacher, Titus, said to him very carefully,

Not by works done in righteousness, which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy he saved us. (Titus 3:5)

From this, one might be inclined to think that Paul did not have much regard for good works, yet down in verse 8 of that same chapter we read, “. . . that they who have believed God may be careful to maintain good works. . . .” Good works do not enter into the matter of salvation, but

when one becomes a Christian, works assume supreme importance.

While I was a student at university, an argument was raging relative to which was more important in a man's life — heredity or environment. To this my professor of psychology gave a rather stimulating answer. He said that before you are born, heredity is more important. After you are born, environment is the major thing. Let us carry that general line of thought over to our present study: Before you are born again, works do not enter in — you cannot bring them to God; but after you have been saved, works become all-important in a Christian's life. Therefore, we see that Paul emphasized the fruit of salvation. Peter followed along in the same current of truth:

But ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that ye may show forth the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. (1 Peter 2:9)

He was saying that those who have been saved should reveal that they are redeemed by God by “show[ing] forth” their good works before the world. Therefore the Christian has good works to show forth, and it is those works that are to be judged — not his salvation.

The Heart of the Study

For as touching those who were once enlightened and tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the age to come, and then fell away, it is impossible to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame. (Hebrews 6:4-6)

In reading these verses, we are brought to the very center of the study. Let us look at the contrast of meaning.

The Greek word for “fell away,” *parapito*, is interesting. It means simply “to stumble, to fall down.” It would be impossible to give it the meaning of “apostatize.” It is the same word used of our Lord when He went into the Garden of Gethsemane, *fell* on His face, and prayed.

There are many examples in Scripture of men who “fell away.” The apostle Peter fell, but he was not lost. The Lord Jesus said to him, “I have prayed that your faith might not fail” (see Luke 22:32). Peter suffered loss, but he was not lost. John Mark is another example. He failed so miserably on the first missionary journey that when his uncle Barnabas suggested that he go on the second journey, Paul turned him down. He as much as said, “Never. This boy has failed, and as far as I am concerned, I am through with him” (see Acts 15:37-39). Well, thank God, although he stumbled and fell, *God* was not through with him. Even the apostle Paul, before he died, acknowledged that he had made a misjudgment of John Mark. In his last epistle he wrote, “...Take Mark, and bring him with thee; for he is useful to me for ministering” (2 Timothy 4:11). Now, neither Peter nor John Mark lost his salvation, but they certainly failed and they suffered loss for it.

Now, if we go back to Hebrews 6:1, we will see that the writer was talking to folk about repentance from dead works — not salvation, but *repentance*. You may remember that John the Baptist preached this to the people also: “Bring forth therefore fruit worthy of repentance”

(Matthew 3:8). He was talking about that which is the *evidence* of repentance. Repentance today does not mean just the shedding of a few tears — it means turning right-about-face toward Jesus Christ, which means a change in our way of living.

Many of the Jewish believers were returning to the temple sacrifice at that time, and the writer to the Hebrews was warning them of the danger of that. Before Christ came, every sacrifice was a picture of Him and pointed to His coming. But after Christ came and died on the cross, that which God commanded in the Old Testament actually became sin.

You see, those folk were at a strategic point in history. The day before the crucifixion of Jesus they had gone to the temple with sacrifices in obedience to God's command, but then it was wrong for them to do it. Why? Because Jesus had become that sacrifice — once and for all. Today if you were to offer a bloody sacrifice, you would be sacrificing afresh the Lord Jesus because you would be saying that when He died it was of no avail, that you still need a sacrifice to take care of your sin. It would mean that you did not have faith in His atonement, in His death, in His redemption. As someone has said, we either crucify or crown the Lord Jesus by our lives. Today we exhibit either a life of faith or a life by which we crucify Him afresh.

The Closing Argument

Now to fix this whole matter in our thinking, let us read on:

For the land which hath drunk the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them for whose sake it is also tilled, receiveth blessing from God: but if it beareth thorns and thistles, it is rejected and nigh unto a curse; whose end is to be burned. (Hebrews 6:7, 8)

What a picture that presents! Here we see the ground in one particular case bringing forth herbs, a fruit which pleases and receives the blessing of God. Then on another occasion it produces thorns, a fruit that displeases and is to be cursed by God. Dr. Vincent, one of the greatest Greek scholars of all times, said that we see here the contrast in two classes of Christians who, under equally favorable conditions, produce opposite results.

In the Upper Room, the Lord Jesus said in substance, "I am the vine, you are the branches, and it is the desire of My Father and Me that you bear much fruit" (see John 15:5). Then He added that if you do not bring forth fruit, the Father will actually remove the branch (v. 6). If in this unfruitful condition you are cut off and taken to heaven, then you will not have any works to present to God at all. My friend, do you see now what Hebrews 6 is talking about? Paul discussed it when he spoke of the fruit of the Spirit being "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22, 23). These things are the result of the Christian life, that which comes because we have trusted, loved, and therefore obeyed Christ our Savior.

So here we have the two ends in view: That of believers who live for God and whose lives *crown* Him, and that of other believers who do not live for God and whose lives *crucify* Him.

We see, then, that salvation is not being discussed in this passage. In verse 8, note the word "rejected," which in the Greek is "disapproved." Paul said that he kept his body under control in order that he might not be disapproved. He never once thought he might lose his salvation, but he did wonder about losing his reward. And when he got to the end of his life, he said, "I have

finished the course” — in other words, I have gone where God wanted me to go; I have done everything He wanted me to do (see Acts 20:24). As best I could, I have been in the will of God. That is what the writer discussed here, and how important it is for a Christian to stay in the will of God!

Finally, we must look at these sublime words:

He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life. . . . (John 3:36)

“Hath eternal life” — that is the present tense. And in John 5:24 our Lord tells us,

He that heareth my word, and believeth him that sent me, hath eternal life, and cometh not into judgment, but hath passed out of death into life.

We have been made partakers of the divine nature, and have become members of the body of Christ.

Someone said to a dear old Scotch lady, “You talk about salvation as if it is sure. Aren’t you afraid that you will slip through the fingers of Jesus?” She said, “No, I am not, for I *am* one of His fingers.”

How grateful we should be today amid the shifting scenes of life, the sinking sands, the instability and failure of friendships, that we have a Savior who saves to the uttermost those who come to God through Him. We have in Him a fixed and sure salvation!

In the year 1791, England gave to the world a great chemist, physicist, and a stalwart of the faith — Michael Faraday. In the last moments of his life, a reporter was permitted to enter his room and stand by his bed. As the reporter looked down at the great scholar, he asked, “What are your speculations now?” Faraday became singularly alert for the moment and said, “Speculations? I have none! I thank God I am not resting my dying head upon guesswork — I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to guard me against that day.”