

# When Is Saving Repentance Impossible?

By John Piper

## Hebrews 6:4-8

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame. 7 For ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; 8 but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.

## Being Serious, But not Sad

There is a big difference between being serious and being sad. The opposite of sad is happy. But the opposite of serious is glib (or joking). So you can be serious and happy at the same time. In fact, C. S. Lewis said, "There is a kind of happiness and wonder that makes you serious." Everybody knows the difference between what a comedian makes us feel and what a friend who lays down his life for us makes us feel. Most people know the deep difference between a day at Disney World and a day at the Grand Canyon.

It seems to me that the book of Hebrews has a special way of making us serious. It is a very sobering book. It is not a sad book. But it is a serious book. If you hear what it says, it blows away glib, trite, trivial attitudes about life. It does this not to make us sad, but to make us unshakably happy in God (see 10:34; 12:2; 13:17).

## A Kind of Happiness that will Kill You

One of the ways that Hebrews does this is with warnings about false security. There is a kind of happiness that will kill you. And the book of Hebrews is relentlessly loving in exposing this dangerous happiness and warning us to flee from its deceptions and pursue the solid happiness that will

never let us down. In other words, Hebrews is written to deepen and strengthen the joy of our assurance in God, and one of the strategies of the book is to expose false assurances and fleeting pleasures.

That's what we are reading in Hebrews 6:4-8. This passage says that there is a spiritual condition that makes repentance and salvation impossible. And it says that this condition may look in many ways like salvation, but it isn't. And it leads to destruction. And so this text is a warning to us not to assume that we are secure when our lives have some religious experiences but no growing fruit. And the reason for showing us this serious situation is so that we will flee from it, and move to solid ground and lasting joy.

Let's look at the flow of thought. Hebrews 6:1 said, "Let us press on to maturity." And verse 3 said, "This we will do if God permits." In other words, whether we have the grace to overcome our natural pride and rebellion and unbelief will depend ultimately on God.

Now verses 4-8 illustrate this utter dependence on God by showing that there is a situation where repentance and pressing on to maturity is impossible. And since it is impossible, we should shudder at the prospect of being in this situation and we should see how utterly dependent we are on the sovereign God of verse 3.

## When Repentance is Impossible

What is this situation where repentance is impossible? It is described like this:

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame. (Hebrews 6:4-6)

The situation is this: first, someone receives great blessings and has high religious experiences (verses 4-5). And then second, that same person falls away and, in doing so, re-crucifies the Son of God and puts him to an open shame. And then third, it is impossible to renew that person to repentance.

Let's look at these three parts of the situation.

1. There are great blessings and high religious experiences.

He mentions four. First, a person may be "enlightened" (verse 4). Second, a person may have tasted the heavenly gift and become a partaker of the Holy Spirit (verse 4). The heavenly gift probably is the Holy Spirit. Third, a person may have tasted the good word of God (verse 5). And fourth, the person may have tasted the powers of the age to come (verse 5; see Hebrews 2:4).

2. In spite of all these blessings and experiences, this person then falls away (verse 6).

That is, he falls away from Christ and the Spirit and the word and the powers of the age to come. He turns his back on the worth of these great realities and goes after other things with his heart. The effect of this is to re-crucify Christ and put him to open shame (verse 6b).

Why is that called re-crucifixion? There are at least two reasons why this kind of apostasy is re-crucifixion of Christ.

One is that Christ was crucified the first time to make his people pure and holy. That's why he shed his blood. Hebrews 13:12 says, "Jesus also suffered outside the gate that He might sanctify the people through His own blood." He died to sanctify us. He died to make us pure and holy and devoted to him (see Hebrews 9:14; Titus 2:14). So when we turn our backs on purity and holiness and devotion, which his cross was designed to bring about, we say yes to the impurity and worldliness and unbelief that nailed him there in the first place. Which means we crucify him again.

There is another reason this kind of falling away is a re-crucifying of Christ. When a person chooses against Christ and turns back to the way of the world and the sovereignty of his own will and the fleeting pleasures of earth, he says in effect that these are worth more than Christ is worth. They are worth more than the love of Christ and the wisdom of Christ and the power of Christ and all that God promises to be for us in Christ. And when a person

says that, it is the same as saying: I agree with the crucifiers of Jesus. Because what could shame Christ more today than to have someone taste his goodness and wisdom and power and then say: No, there is something better and more to be desired. That puts him to a public shame.

It is one thing for a stranger to the faith to resist Christ. But it is another thing for a person who has been in the church and has been enlightened and tasted of the heavenly gift and become a partaker of the Holy Spirit and tasted of the good word of God and the powers of the age to come—it's another thing for that person to say after all those blessings and all those experiences: I think what the world offers is better than this. That is a re-crucifying of Jesus and a putting him to public shame worse than any outsider could, who never tasted the truth.

3. Which leads, to the conclusion that "it is impossible to renew [such a person] again to repentance" (verse 6).

We saw an illustration of this last week from Hebrews 12:16-17. There it speaks a similar kind of warning as here:

[Let] there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. 17 For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.

Will Genuine Repentance be Rejected by God? Don't make the mistake of thinking that Esau genuinely repented and was rejected by God. God does not reject genuine repentance. The text says plainly that he found no place for repentance. In other words, he couldn't repent. He was so hardened (see Hebrews 3:8,15; 4:7) that he cried out for things to go better in his life, but inside he would not submit to God's terms. He was, as verse 16 says, "immoral and godless."

This is an illustration of what the writer has in mind in Hebrews 6:6 when he says it is impossible to renew this person again to repentance. This is the terrifying prospect behind all the warnings of this book not to drift but to take heed and consider Jesus and to exhort each other every day and to fear unbelief and carelessness. Why? Is anything really at stake? The prospect exists that you and I who believe we are chosen and called and justified might slide into a slow process of indifference and hardening and eventually fall away and reject Christ

and put him to an open shame. We may actually come to a point where there is no return, because we have been forsaken utterly by God. That's what the word "impossible" means in verse 6. and Oh, how it should put you on an urgent pursuit of mercy this morning!

### **Can One be a "Partaker" and not be Justified?**

Now the question we all ask here is whether the person who falls away like this was ever truly "saved" or "justified" or "called" or "born again." Can you taste and be a partaker of the Holy Spirit and the word of God and the powers of the age to come and not be justified? In other words, is this text teaching that you can lose your standing as a truly saved person and be lost? Or is it teaching that you can have these experiences in verses 4 and 5 and never have been saved? Both teachings are shocking and sobering. Which is true?

Without weakening the seriousness and the warning of these verses I want to argue that it is possible to have all these blessings and all these experiences and not be justified or born again or saved. I will mention only five reasons, all of them taken from Hebrews—and there are many more outside Hebrews (Romans 8:29-39; Jude 24-25; Ephesians 1:3-14; 1 John 2:19; 1 Peter 1:5; Philippians 1:6; 2:13; 1 Corinthians 1:8-9; 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24; Ezekiel 11:19; 36:27; Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 24:7; 32:40).

1. Consider verses 7-8. Here the situation with those who fall away is put in a picture. After verse 6 says that repentance is impossible for the apostates, verses 7-8 say,

For ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it [this drinking of frequent rains is a reference to all the blessings of verses 4-5: the light, the Spirit, the word the powers] and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; 8 but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.

So the picture is not of a field that had life and vegetation and then lost it. The picture is of two different kinds of fields—one is fruitful and blessed; the other is barren and cursed. I think the point is: if we have sat in church with the light and the Spirit and the word and the work of God coming to us and blessing us and even shaping us in some degree, but

then turn our back on it, we are like a field without vegetation and will come into judgment. The rain we have drunk (light, Spirit, word, powers) produced no life in the field.

2. Consider verse 9. After holding out the real possibility that some in the church might commit apostasy, he says,

But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way.

The key phrase is "things that accompany salvation." The "better things" that he is confident about are things that always go with salvation (literally, are possessed by salvation). They belong to salvation. So what he is saying is that he believes they really are "saved" and that therefore they will not commit apostasy and be a barren field. They will bear fruit. They will not fall away. The phrase "things that accompany salvation" shows that the writer really believes that they have salvation and therefore will have the things that always accompany salvation: persevering faith and fruitfulness. He does not believe that fruitlessness and apostasy accompany salvation. Better things do.

3. Consider Hebrews 3:14 (and 3:6).

We have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.

The key thing here is the tense of the verb, "we have become partakers of Christ." Not we "will become partakers" and not "we are now partakers," but: "we have become partakers of Christ—if we hold fast our assurance." In other words, perseverance in faith proves that you became a partaker in Christ. Which means that if you do not persevere in faith, it does not show that you fall out of partaking in Christ, but that you never became a partaker in Christ. If we hold fast to our assurance, we have become partakers of Christ; and if we do not hold fast, but commit apostasy (as Hebrews 6:6 describes) then we have not become partakers of Christ. (The same argument holds for the tense of the verb in Hebrews 3:6.) Therefore, it seems clear that this writer does not believe you can be in Christ and then out again.

4. Consider Hebrews 10:14.

By one offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified [present tense, ongoing action].

If Hebrews 6:6 meant that you could be justified by the blood of Christ and then lose that standing with God, this verse would seem to have no meaning. It says that for those who are now being sanctified (that is, who are now indwelt by the Spirit and born of God and are growing in holiness by faith), the offering of Christ on the cross has perfected that person for all time. For all time! In other words to become a beneficiary of the perfecting, justifying work of Christ on the cross is to be perfected in the sight of God forever. This suggests that Hebrews 6:6 does not mean that those who re-crucify Christ were once really justified by the blood of Jesus and were really being sanctified in an inward spiritual sense.

#### 5. Consider Hebrews 13:20-21.

Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, 21 equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Verse 20 speaks of an eternal covenant sealed by the blood of Jesus. That is the new covenant which this book has made much of in chapters 8 and 9. The new covenant is the promise that God will put a new heart in us and cause us to walk in his ways and not turn away from doing us good (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:27; Jeremiah 24:7; 32:40). So in verse 21 he says that it is not finally dependent on us whether we persevere in faith and bear fruit. It is finally dependent on God: He is working in us that which is pleasing in his sight. He is fulfilling the new covenant promise to preserve us.

This means that Hebrews 6:6 would contradict the new covenant if it meant that people could be truly justified members of the new covenant and then commit apostasy and be rejected. That would mean that God did not fulfill his promise to "work in them what is pleasing in his sight." He would have broken his new covenant promise.

For these five reasons I conclude that if a person falls away and re-crucifies the Son of God, he has never been justified. His faith was not a saving faith.

#### **What Then Do These Verses Mean for Us?**

I'll be very personal, to give it its sharpest point. If in the coming years I commit apostasy and fall away from Christ, it will not be because I have not tasted of the word of God and the Spirit of God and the miracles of God. I have drunk of his word. The Spirit has touched me. I have seen his miracles and I have been his instrument for a few.

But if, over the next ten or twenty years, John Piper begins to cool off spiritually and lose interest in spiritual things and become more fascinated with making money and writing Christless books; and I buy the lie that a new wife would be exhilarating and that the children can fend for themselves and that the church of Christ is a drag and that the incarnation is a myth and that there is one life to live so let us eat drink and be merry—if that happens, then know that the truth is this: John Piper was mightily deceived in the first fifty years of his life. His faith was an alien vestige of his father's joy. His fidelity to his wife was a temporary passion and compliance with social pressure; his fatherhood the outworking of natural instincts. His preaching was driven by the love of words and crowds. His writing was a love affair with fame. And his praying was the deepest delusion of all—an attempt to get God to supply the resources of his vanity.

If this possibility does not make me serious and vigilant in the pursuit of everlasting joy, what will?

The practical conclusion of this awesome truth is given in next week's text. In the meantime, I pray that you will not be glib, but serious, about whether Christ is your highest joy. If you really bank your hope on him and in him, he will not let you go.