

Chapter 10 – Inheritance depends upon maturity - Hebrews 6 Part 1

From the outset the author has been urging his readers to heed the Gospel promises and move on in their faith to inherit all God has promised. But he knows that unbelief has been endemic amongst the Jews since the days of Moses. Later in chapter 6 the author urges his readers “to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.” For this they need to go onto maturity, but those who remain infants in faith are vulnerable to discouragement and may replicate the unbelief of the Israelites in the desert, finding themselves barred from further progress.

Hebrews chapter 6 is one of the most controversial chapters in the bible. Its interpretation is a puzzle which has never been generally agreed upon. Because of this, I have given closer attention to its interpretation and devoted two chapters and an appendix to it, breaking at verse 8. In view of the difficulties, it is even more important to keep the section in context with the rest of the letter. Consequently I deal with the surprises, structure and argument for the whole chapter at the start.

Prayer

Try using the *thanksgiving, remembrance, confidence* model of prayer as you think over what you have learnt from Hebrews chapter 5 and look forward to studying chapter 6.

Questions and Surprises

Starting with the surprises and questions, this is what strikes me in chapter 6.

- V1-2 What are these doctrines and why are they
 considered basic?
 Why is laying on of hands in this list?
- V3 Why does God need to permit them to move on?
- V4-6 Who is the writer thinking of? Why is their
 restoration impossible?
- V7-8 What would the readers have made of this imagery
 of land that produces thorns and thistles?
- V9 What things “accompany salvation”?
- V10 How will God reward faithfulness?
- V11 What is this “hope”?
- V12 What has “been promised”?
- V13-15 Is Abraham just an example, or is this the promise
 we are to inherit?
- V16-18 What are these two “unchangeable things”?
- V19 Why does he say we have “fled” to take hold of the
 hope offered to us?
- V20 Why does he say the hope has entered the inner
 sanctuary?
- V21 What has all this to do with the high priestly role of
 Christ?

Background

The main background reading is for the second half of the chapter and will be addressed in part 2. For the first half of the chapter background is found at Ps 65:10 and Isa 5:1-7. See also Gen 3:18, Lev 26:33, Deut 29:20ff, Isa 5:1-7, 7:23, 32:12f, Jer 25:8ff, Hos 9:6, 10:8, Luke 13:6-8 for the Hebrew use of the imagery of barren land.

Structure

My medium-brush structure for this chapter was:

- 5:11-6:8 The Hebrews were dull of hearing and in danger of falling away.
- 6:9-20 Exhortation to move on and inherit the promises given to Abraham.

My fine-brush structure is:

- 6:1-3 The need to move on from the basics towards maturity.
- 6:4-8 Warnings about the danger of falling away.
- 6:9-12 Encouragement to inherit what has been promised.
- 6:13-18 God made the promise to Abraham by an unchangeable oath.
- 6:19-20 The hope of this promise is secured by Jesus our Melchizedek high priest.

In phrasing this structure I have tried to capture the flow of argument. My first attempt at this was worded differently, without the repeated use of the word “promise” in the last three sections. But as I worked on the argument and saw how the theme of promise runs through, I modified the wording of my structure to reflect this. This illustrates how the process of exegesis is iterative. Each stage of the process suggests modifications to previous stages which may need revising. As the logic of the book unfolds we should go back and clarify, strengthen or correct our earlier thoughts.

Argument

The argument from the previous chapter flows in a fairly understandable way through this one, but I think it is time to take a step back and see its place in the context of all we have

studied so far. Let's attempt a fresh summary of the main argument of the first five chapters now that we have a much clearer understanding of them.

To do this, I suggest you read through these chapters again, looking for the main connecting argument. Try to note the key points of concern to the author and the key arguments he employs. This is my attempt:

Chapter 1: The Son is utterly superior to the angels in every way.

Chapter 2: Yet the Son came in human flesh and shared in our humanity so that He could obtain salvation for us as our new High Priest.

Chapter 3: But we face the same issues of hard heartedness and the need for faith as did the Israelites in the desert.

Chapter 4: The goal of our faith is that same rest which was promised to Israel in the promise land. They never obtained lasting rest, but Jesus promised everlasting rest for those who put their faith firmly in Him. We must learn from the Israelite lesson and not repeat their errors. Instead let us come to the throne of grace with boldness through our High Priest, Jesus. Let us obtain from Him sympathetic help to strengthen our faith so that we might enter, and remain in, our confident rest in Christ.

Chapter 5: We can be assured of His sympathetic help because, before His appointment by God as our High Priest, Jesus served His full apprenticeship as a man. The explanation of Jesus' appointment as a High Priest in the order of Melchizedek is meat for which they may not be mature enough.

I have not tried to include everything the author touches on, but to distil the essence of his argument. This is not an exact science and if I repeated the exercise in a month I would probably phrase it differently. Nevertheless I think this summary encapsulates the main thrust of the author's argument

and reveals his train of thought. Now let us try to fit chapters 6 and 7 onto this.

If we did not have chapter 6, we would probably not know it was missing. The argument goes naturally from “We have much to say about Melchizedek” at the end of chapter 5 to “This Melchizedek was king of Salem...” at the opening of chapter 7. What is more, chapter 6, which interrupts the explanation about Melchizedek, seems to fit better with chapter 4. Both concern promises and oaths and exhortations to faith. It is almost as if chapter 5 was premature. Perhaps if the author had been using a word processor he would have swapped chapters 5 and 6. It is easy to see how this slightly convoluted train of thoughts came about. His references to the sympathetic response we can expect from Jesus, our High Priest, led naturally to the sources of this sympathy in Jesus’ earthly experience. His Jewish mind cried out for an explanation of the validity of this priesthood, since Jesus was not a Levite. But as soon as he started out on this explanation, he realised that it needed much fuller treatment than simply quoting Psalm 110. But he had not yet reached the climax of the argument he had been setting out since the start of the letter. So he puts the explanation about Melchizedek on hold and returns to produce the climax of his exhortations and warnings.

So here is my outline argument for chapter 6:

You need to be moving on to maturity in your faith and not just stay in the familiar ground of the basic new believer’s doctrines. Those who remain babes in faith are vulnerable to all we have been warning about – failing to believe the promises when under stress and being in danger of going beyond the point where they can be restored. But we are confident that you will imitate the faithful, not the faithless, and come into all God has for you. God made a cast-iron promise of blessing to

Abraham which God wants us to fully inherit. He has provided Jesus as our High Priest to help us.

The Detail

We now look more closely at the detail of chapter 6.

Heb 6:1-3

⁽¹⁾ “Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, ⁽²⁾ instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ⁽³⁾ And God permitting, we will do so.

The elementary teachings

Since the author encourages us to leave the teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, I do not propose to review them in detail, but let us at least ask ourselves if we know what doctrines he is talking about and why he considers them as basic.¹

Repentance from acts that lead to death

I find the authors choice of words in naming the first elementary teaching really quite surprising. I would have called it “Repentance from ignoring God.” I have in mind John’s remarks in chapter 3 of his gospel: “Everyone who does evil

¹ Commentators are split over whether the author is referring to Jewish doctrines which underlie Christianity or basic Christian doctrines. The six doctrines are all found in contemporary Jewish beliefs. My view is that these are Christian doctrines developed from their Jewish roots.

hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.” But the writer to the Hebrews calls it “repentance from acts that lead to death.” The writer is obviously not talking about repentance from suicide or smoking or extreme sports. Repentance from acts that might lead to one’s physical death may be sound advice but it is not an “elementary teaching about Christ.”

I wonder how a first century Jewish Christian would have understood this. Under the Law of Moses there were a number of acts that led to death. They were murder, kidnapping, cursing of mother or father, adultery, sexual perversion, idol worship, witchcraft, blasphemy and Sabbath breaking. Is it repentance from these acts which the author has in mind? Are these part of the “elementary teachings about Christ”? This cannot be right. It is not repentance from these few things which opens the way of salvation to us, but repentance from all that is contrary to God. The author must have had something else in mind.

The NIV is in the minority in translating the Greek as “acts that lead to death”. Most translations stick more literally to the Greek and have “dead works”. The difference is significant as the NIV points to the consequences of the acts, whereas the literal translation points more to the uselessness of the acts.

This opens up the possibility that the doctrine concerns stopping the offering of sacrifices, which under the Law was necessary for forgiveness of sins. They would certainly have been considered by Christians as dead works, having no use or effectiveness now that Christ had given Himself as “a sacrifice for sin, once for all”². Indeed, even Jews were familiar with the notion of dead works. The prophets warned them that sacrifices

² Heb 7:7

without true repentance were dead works; they were ineffective. Jesus repeatedly quoted Hosea saying, “go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’” The Jews knew that without repentance and obedience, a sacrifice was a dead work. Jesus reminded them that without love and mercy, strict obedience to the Law was a dead work. Following the resurrection and the understanding that in the crucifixion Christ offered Himself as *the* Passover lamb, Christians taught that all dependence upon the Mosaic sacrifices were now dead works. So is this what the author has in mind: Jewish believers in Christ stopping their former practice of offering sacrifices for sin?

Later in the letter the author uses the same phrase: “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from dead works, so that we may serve the living God!” (Heb 9:14) The fact that the author writes about “cleansing our conscience” from dead works leads me to think that in both chapter 6 and then in chapter 9 he is not thinking about the old sacrificial system, but rather the false belief that we can do things to save ourselves. He is addressing not only the issue of the Mosaic sacrifices but every thought in our conscience that if we do such and such God will accept us or overlook our failings – if we pray more, read our bibles more, love our family and friends more, help the poor more... Dead works were not only a problem for Jews in relation to the Law, but are an every day issue for all who are tempted to look to the quality of their own lives, rather than the life and death of Christ in their search for security in God.

This, I suggest is what the author has in mind when he talks about repentance from dead works. My mind is taken back to

that poor man found picking up sticks on the Sabbath.³ The penalty for his unthinking act was a warning for all who try to work for their own salvation. However hard we try to prove our worthiness to God we will always fall short of His standards. But much worse than that, to do so is to declare that we reject the sufficiency of His provision for our salvation. Saving faith depends, not upon repenting from every known sin (that comes later), but on repenting of thinking we can save ourselves. This is repentance from dead works.

... faith in God

It is so easy to read the words “faith in God” assuming we know what that means, simply because we are so familiar with the phrase. Yet I am struck by the fact that we so easily divorce the idea of faith from the practice of trust. This was always a problem for God’s people. Many people seem to think that if they believe God exists and is the sovereign creator of all things then they satisfy the requirement to have faith. But James says “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.”⁴ The question is not what you say you believe, but what you show you trust. Faith in God is not an intellectual idea but a practical reality. The Christian faith is not a set of doctrines but a life of trusting obedience to God and dependence upon God. The doctrines provide an intellectual foundation for that faith, but they do not themselves constitute the faith.

When we think and teach about faith in God we should first and foremost be thinking in terms of living trust, not correct doctrine. We will take sufficient care of our doctrine when we

³ His story is recorded in Numbers 15. We looked at this during our study of Hebrews 4 under “The significance of the Sabbath”

⁴ Jas 2:19

take sufficient care of our living, but the converse is not necessarily true. The elementary teaching about faith in God is all about living out our trust that God is utterly good, completely loving, unsearchably wise, totally sovereign and immeasurably gracious.⁵ Who, in their right mind, would not trust and obey such a God? Yet many who profess “faith” fall well short of actually living as if they trust God. It is a most rewarding exercise to do an extended study of the trust worthiness of God.

...instruction about baptisms

John the Baptist did not invent baptism. It was already an established requirement for converts to Judaism to be fully immersed in water and Jews who had become ritually unclean would also baptise themselves⁶. The Pharisees had introduced the practice of ritual washing before meals⁷. Archaeologists have found baptism baths, known as mikvahs, attached to many houses dating from Jesus’ day, indicating that this was a full bath not just a hand wash. This was the purpose of the water jars that are mentioned in the story of the Cana wedding in John 4. It had also become common for Rabbi’s to baptise their followers. Because of the wide use of baptism for different purposes it was important for Christians to be instructed properly about the place of baptism within the faith. The fact that the term is in the plural suggests that both water and spirit baptism are in view and possibly other related issues

⁵ He is, of course, many other things as well, including unquenchably jealous and incorruptibly just.

⁶ see for example Le 17:15

⁷ See Mk 7:4 “When they come from the market-place they do not eat unless they wash (Gk Baptise).”

such as baptism for the dead, which Paul mentions in his letter to the Corinthians.⁸

... the laying on of hands

I doubt if many of us would include the laying on of hands among the list of essential basic doctrines for a new believer. I would swap it for love or unity or service or prayer, or group these together under the heading of spiritual disciplines. So what is so important to the author in the laying on of hands? To a Jew the term would have two meanings: the practice of laying ones hands on a sacrificial goat or lamb to symbolically lay ones sin on the animal and so be cleansed of sin⁹, and the means of imparting a blessing¹⁰. In the Christian faith laying on hands was used for imparting healing, baptism in the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is clear from Paul's letters that the presence and working of the Holy Spirit in people lives and in the churches was crucial and evident. Indeed, it is the pouring out of the promised Holy Spirit which marks the coming of the new Covenant. Perhaps it is for this reason that the laying on of hands is considered so

⁸ 1Co 15:29 "Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptised for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptised for them?" No one knows for sure what Paul was referring to. But we do know that in the first century church baptism was understood to be essential for entrance into the family of Christ. In view of this there was grave concern for those who had come to faith, but died before baptism, either through martyrdom, accident or natural causes. My guess is that a practice arose of baptising a close relative as a proxy in these cases.

⁹ Le 16:21 "He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head."

¹⁰ Either informally, as in Isaac blessing Jacob, or formally as in the ordination of the priests.

foundational. It was the means by which the Holy Spirit was imparted to the church and to each individual believer. Without the evident presence and powerful working of the Holy Spirit the church could hardly claim to be alive.¹¹

...the resurrection of the dead

The resurrection of the dead is not a doctrine I have heard taught much, if at all. We are much more likely to hear about eternal life, but the two are not the same. The Greeks of Plato's time, well before Christ, believed in eternal life. Most people seem to believe in eternal life. Most believe that their soul will live on after they die. They believe they will become one with nature, or one with God, or come back as someone else, or just live happily for ever after in some spiritual state in some spiritual world which they call heaven. But this is not the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. Jews and Christians believe that some time in the future, *after death*, there will be a great resurrection of all who have died and then a great judgement.¹² What is more, this is a physical bodily resurrection. Judgement day will not comprise of hosts of souls being judged, but hosts of *embodied* souls, real physical

¹¹ See for example Gal 3:3, "Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?"

¹² Hints of resurrection are found in various OT scriptures, even as early as Job, considered to be the oldest book. See Job 14:7-15; 19:15-27. See also Ps 16:8-11; 49:14-15; 73:23-26, Isa 25:6-8; 26:19; 53:10-12, Hos 13:14. It is first stated clearly in Dan 12:2 "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt." Daniel also spoke of the Day of Judgement "... the Ancient of Days took his seat... The court was seated, and the books were opened." (Da 7:9-10). The doctrine of resurrection developed rapidly in the time between the Old Testament and Christ's birth (see e.g. 2 Macc 7) but the Sadducees did not accept it. See Lk 20:27ff.

people. When Revelation speaks of the earth giving up the dead¹³, it is not talking about disembodied souls. Central to the New Testament witness is the physical resurrection of Jesus as the first-fruits of a great harvest. Paul goes to great lengths to teach about the physical resurrection of the dead.¹⁴ True, the resurrected body is not the same as the one that died. Paul says, “The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.”¹⁵ But the great point of preaching that Christ rose physically from the dead as the firstfruit of many is that there will be a physical resurrection. But what is equally clear from the New Testament is that this resurrection does not take place immediately on death. There is something in between death and resurrection. The dead await the resurrection. At the coming of Christ, the dead in Christ will rise.¹⁶ In the mean time they are with the Lord in paradise, consciously worshiping God and waiting for the resurrection when they will receive their new bodies. The New Testament frequently talks about sowing in this life and reaping in the

¹³ Re 20:13 “The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done.”

¹⁴ See 1Cor 15. In v20 he says, “Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” He was only able to spend three Sabbaths planting the church at Thessalonica before he had to leave, yet the two letters to that church show that he taught them extensively about the return of Christ and the resurrection.

¹⁵ 1Cor 15:42-44

¹⁶ 1Thess 4:16. Only Christians are resurrected at the return of Christ. This is the first resurrection when Christians will be judged (Rev 20:4-6, 22:12). Then on Judgement day unbelievers are resurrected and judged (20:13-15).

new heavens and new earth following the resurrection of the dead. Just as our bodies are sown in our death, so all our faith and love and good works are sown for a future great harvest. That is why we should do everything “as to the Lord” and take care how we build. Life is not simply waiting for heaven, it is sowing for eternity. The resurrection of the dead is a foundational doctrine of great importance and significance. If this is not understood and lived out, then it is unlikely we are ready to move on to maturity.

... eternal judgment.

The last basic foundation the author lists is eternal judgment. The New Testament is very clear that this is more than simply sorting the sheep from the goats. Paul writes, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” (2Cor 5:10) Earlier in Hebrews we read, “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before him to whom we must give account” (Heb 4:13).

Evangelicals have tended to be very wary of talking about good works lest anyone think they can earn their salvation. It is certainly true that we cannot earn God’s forgiveness and we depend completely upon His grace, but we would be foolish to ignore what the New Testament says about the place of good works. To most of the churches addressed in the opening chapters of Revelation, Jesus says, “I know your works.” It is on the basis of our works, not the correctness of our doctrines that Christians are judged. The judgement will result in reward or loss according to our works. Jesus said, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and

where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” In Revelation we read, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “they will rest from their labour, for their deeds will follow them” (Rev. 14:13). Eternity will hold what we have invested in it in this life. The doctrine of eternal judgement is of eternal importance.

And God permitting, we will do so.

It seems strange that God would need to permit a believer to move on to maturity, but the author has repeatedly warned about neglecting the gospel and harbouring unbelief, reminding the readers that God swore an oath against the unbelieving Israelites preventing a whole generation from entering the promised land. The author clearly believes it possible that God might swear an oath preventing progression for persistently unbelieving and disobedient Christians. So it is indeed necessary for God to permit us to move on to maturity.

Heb 6:4-8

(4) It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, (5) who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, (6) if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. (7) Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. (8) But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.

In this passage the author is concerned about a certain type of believer who may be vulnerable to falling away. Some

commentators have tried to say this passage is about people falling away because they are false believers. But the author mentions five authenticating signs of the believer's faith.

... those who have once been enlightened

Light is a well established symbol of salvation. Jesus spoke about the need to have our bodies "full of light" and described himself as "the light of the world." Paul wrote "You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness." And later in this letter the author writes: "Remember those earlier days after you had been enlightened, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering."¹⁷ In the New Testament, to be enlightened means to be a child of God; to be saved.

... who have tasted the heavenly gift

"Tasted the heavenly gift" is reminiscent of Ps 34:8 "Taste and see that the Lord is good..." The heavenly gift is not specified, but we can assume it is not the Holy Spirit, since He is mentioned separately. Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." It may be that the author has in mind the gift of the body and blood of Jesus shared in the breaking of bread. This was given far more significance than is often found today.

Peter wrote, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good."¹⁸ Peter is talking about more

¹⁷ Lk 11:34ff, Jn 8:12, 1Th 5:5, Heb 10:32. See also Jn 1:9, Eph 5:8-14, 1 Pet 2:9

¹⁸ Jn 6:51, 1Pe 2:1-3

than the breaking of bread here. He includes the whole range of blessings that flow from faith in Christ.

Bearing in mind that “heaven” was a common euphemism among Jews for “God” we can read the phrase from Hebrews as “who have tasted the gift of God.” The gift of God is a phrase that occurs frequently in the New Testament and is summarised by Paul in Ro 6:23 “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” It seems likely that the author had a wide range of salvation benefits in mind. Whatever the author meant by the heavenly gift he surely intends it to indicate that saving grace has been enjoyed.

... who have shared in the Holy Spirit

Sharing in the personal experience of the Holy Spirit is a sure sign of New Covenant salvation. He was promised by the prophets and His presence within us is a guarantee of our inheritance in Christ.¹⁹ In Paul’s writing, the presence of the Holy Spirit is *the* authenticating sign of salvation.²⁰

...who have tasted the goodness of the word of God

Paul says that the gospel is veiled and foolishness to those who are perishing.²¹ To taste and see that the word of God is good is another sign of salvation.

¹⁹ Eph 1:13-14 “Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession.”

²⁰ For a full defence of this claim see Fee, “God’s empowering presence.”

²¹ 1 Cor 1:18, 2 Cor 4:3

... and the powers of the coming age

When John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus to ask, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” These were the powers of the coming age that Isaiah had prophesied,²² and which, as the author pointed out in Hebrews 2:4, had been witnessed in the church since then. To taste of the powers of the coming age is not just to have observed them in others, but to have experienced them for oneself.

Do the use of the words “sharing” and “tasting” indicate incomplete experience?

Some have argued that the author is describing people who appear to be saved, but who have not actually come to full saving faith. They suggest that enlightenment may indicate a little light and that tasting is not consumption; (something may be tasted and then spat out); and that sharing may be incomplete. But this is not the New Testament usage of these phrases. In Hebrews 2:9 when the author wrote that Jesus tasted death for everyone, he did not mean it was only a partial death! Neither is sharing used in a partial sense in the following places where the same Greek word is used:

Heb 3:1 “...holy brothers, who *share* in the heavenly calling...”

Heb 3:14 “We have come to *share* in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.”

Heb 12:8 “But if you are without chastening, of which all have become *partakers*...”

²² Mt 11:3-5, Isa 35:5-6

There is not a hint here that the author is describing false believers, but rather that he is trying to emphasize how thoroughly saved these people are and that they have witnessed the reality of Christ in their lives.

...if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance,

We are in the middle of a rather long sentence. Let us simplify it so we can see where we are going:

“It is impossible for [Christians] who fall away to be brought back to repentance.”

Falling away

Because this verse has been so controversial for centuries we need to look at it with some care. First let’s consider the meaning of *fall away*. The Greek word translated *fall away* occurs only here in Hebrews 6:6 but its root comes in two other versions: fall and fall from. The word translated *fall* occurs 88 times. Of these the ones relating to our subject are these:

“Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious.” (Rom 11:11)

“And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (1Cor 10:10-12)

“And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert?” (Heb 3:17)

“Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no-one will fall by following their example of disobedience.” (Heb 4:11)

“But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment.” (Jas 5:12 NAS95)

All but the last quote apply the word to the example of Israel who fell but were not cut off from God’s covenant. It is never used of apostasy. Even in Romans 11 Paul uses it to describe a temporary deafness to the gospel among the Jews.

The Greek word translated *fall from* or *fail* occurs 17 times. Of these, the ones relating to our subject are these:

“You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.” (Ga 5:4)

“Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position.” (2Pe 3:17)

“Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.” (Re 2:5)

Another word translated “fall away” is used by Jesus to describe his disciples who denied Him after his arrest and also to describe those in the parable of the soils, and in the end-times, who fall away through persecution. Paul uses the same word to describe Christians who fall into sin.

In every case where the idea of falling is related to faith it refers to those who fall from what they had and who need to return to faith and obedience. None of these words necessarily means apostasy, but rather to falling *short* in faith or obedience. In each case it is applied to those in danger of losing their *standing* in the faith. They stumble but not beyond repentance and recovery. This simply demonstrates that in 1st century Christianity it was common to talk about Christians falling in their faith without any suggestion of loss of salvation

or the impossibility of restoration. But in Hebrews 6:6 we have a variation of the word not used elsewhere in the NT and with it a warning that restoration to repentance is impossible.

Apostasy or laziness?

Because the author says restoration is impossible, Hebrews 6:6 has commonly been taken to mean that Christians who turn from the faith and deny Christ as the Saviour lose their salvation and cannot be restored. Certainly the question of the restoration of apostate believers (those who renounced their faith) was a big issue for the early church which suffered severe persecution, but I do not think that is the concern here. The context, set out in Hebrews chapters 2-5, is not of persecution²³ or renunciation of faith but rather of laziness and the hardening of hearts due to sin.

Repeated unfaithfulness

The phrase “brought back” or “renew them again” gives an indication of repeated falling and renewal in the past, which can no longer be repeated. Perhaps this is also hinted at in verse 7 where he says “the rain often falls” suggesting the repeated appeals of God. Certainly this was the story of the Israelites. God had forgiven them ten times for rebellion and unbelief, but there came a time when they could be restored no more.²⁴ God acted in judgement. The difficulty here is that the author does not say that *eventually* they may not be able to be restored, but simply that if they fall away they cannot be restored.

²³ Heb 10 refers to past persecution, but there is no reference to present persecution.

²⁴ “... who disobeyed me and tested me ten times...” (Num 14:22)

Falling from the promise

I think the context of the Israelites in the desert gives us the meaning of *falling away*. They fell from the possibility of inheritance. They had already “fallen” in their faith numerous times: when they trembled before Pharaoh’s chariots at the Red Sea, when they complained of lack of water and bread and meat, when they made the Golden Calf. On each of these occasions they fell into sin and unbelief. Each time Moses interceded, God forgave them and they continued on their journey towards the Promised Land. On each of these occasions they were *renewed* or *restored* through repentance. But when they fell yet again, being fearful before the giants in the land, Moses could not prevail, even though they repented. The Lord said, “I have forgiven them, as you asked” (Num 14:20), but He still swore an oath against them, preventing them from entering the land. They fell from the possibility of entering the Promised Land. Even though they repented **and were forgiven**, they could not be *restored* to their former hope of inheritance. In Hebrews 3 and 4 the term *fall* was applied to this final inability to obtain the promise.

Esau’s example

This situation is illustrated again by the author in Heb 12:16-17. Here Esau is mentioned as another example of someone who threw away his inheritance and could not get it restored despite his repentance. The phrasing here is significant. The NIV has “Afterwards, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.” The NASB which follows the Greek more literally has “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.” The NIV conveys the meaning better, but the NASB follows the author’s use of the word

“repentance” to describe Esau’s desire to reverse the loss he suffered as a result of his actions. He repented of his foolish action, but could not obtain repentance from its consequence.

Conclusion

This, I suggest is the meaning of Hebrews 6:6, consistent with the arguments of Hebrews 3 and 4. Once a person loses the promise because of repeated disobedience or unbelief they cannot recover the promise, even with their repentance and God’s forgiveness. They have fallen away from the promise; they are barred from it, the promise cannot be *renewed*. If we harden our hearts we can no longer hear the Holy Spirit speaking to us and God may eventually bar us from further progress. That is why the author says, let us go on to maturity “if God permits.”

... because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

The author says those who fall away crucify the Son of God all over again and subject him to public disgrace. The author makes a similar sounding statement in Hebrews 10:26 “For if we go on sinning wilfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.” But these statements are, in fact, quite different. The former says that these people crucify Christ again *by* their sin, whereas the latter statement says there is no sacrifice *for* their sin.

There no longer remains a sacrifice for sins

Some, seeing a similarity with 10:26, think this verse is saying if a person who has fallen away were to be restored, then that would require a second sacrifice for their sin, since they had already benefited from the crucifixion when they first came to faith. And since there is no second crucifixion they cannot be

forgiven a second time. But the author does not say that *if* they were restored they *would* crucify Christ again, but that in their falling away they *do* crucify Christ again. Thus I reject this understanding.

Through apostasy they crucify Christ again

Apostasy is the rejection of the claims of Jesus to be the Son of God. In my experience, true apostasy is a rare thing. Those I know who have stopped following Christ have not rejected their belief in Him but only their desire to follow Him in the way they have been taught. Some have been led away through sin, others through hurt or disappointment or boredom. Some may make a public rejection of Christ under persecution, but never reject Him in their hearts. This may be considered cowardly, but does it warrant eternal damnation?

True apostasy is a heart-felt denouncing of Christ; the wish to crucify Jesus all over again and put Him to public disgrace. Perhaps this verse recalls the scene of Jesus' crucifixion through the eyes of the Jewish crowds who cried out "Crucify him!" They completely rejected the claims of Christ to be the Messiah and pronounce Him a fraud. Thus a believer who renounces their faith, claiming Jesus was a liar, would effectively be joining this crowd and "crucifying the Son of God all over again." It is believable that Christians who make such an utter rejection of Christ cannot be restored to faith. If they have seen salvation from the inside and then utterly rejected its very foundation what more is there that can be said to such a person to restore faith?

Having said all this, I do not think apostasy is what is meant here by *falling away*. The context is not of persecution or renunciation of faith but rather of laziness and the hardening of hearts due to sin. Thus I also reject this interpretation.

Through repeated faithlessness they crucify Christ again

I have argued above that the falling away from which a believer cannot return is the loss of a promise due to God swearing an oath against them following repeated warnings and unbelief. How does this relate to crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace?

Jesus was crucified to deliver us from our sin. He was publicly disgraced to save us from eternal disgrace. When we continue to sin, we effectively heap our sin upon Jesus on the cross. We bring disgrace to the name of Jesus before the heavenly realm and before our fellow men. When God's people are judged by Him it brings further dishonour. The Jews were very familiar with this notion. God's name was disgraced when they were over run by their enemies due to their rebellion. God said through Ezekiel "And wherever they went among the nations they profaned my holy name, for it was said of them, 'These are the LORD's people, and yet they had to leave his land'" (Ezek 36:20).

The cross was the means of delivering God's people from His wrath, but repeated disobedience brings shame to Christ whose body we are and eventually drives God to bring judgement against an individual or a community (such as we see threatened to the church at Ephesus in Rev 2:5).

When someone, through stubborn rebellion, crucifies the Son of God all over again and subjects him to public disgrace, then God may swear an oath against him, barring him from inheriting God's promises so that there can be no retraction of the oath, even if they repent. This, I suggest is the meaning of these verses.

thorns and thistles

The author now moves from direct warning about falling away to a metaphor used throughout scripture.²⁵

“Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.”
(Heb 6:4-8)

This is a metaphor for the basic covenant promises given to Moses: if the people obey God they will receive blessing, but if they disobey they will experience God’s curse.²⁶

The metaphor derives one half from the curse of the fall, where God said to Adam that the land would produce thorns and thistles, and the other half from the assurance that the Promised Land would be fruitful, flowing with milk and honey. Isaiah applies the metaphor to Israel, describing them as an unfruitful vineyard where briars and thorns grow. Jesus urged the Jews to repent and believe using a parable about a fruitless tree that was in danger of being cursed, but the gardener persuaded the owner to give it one more year. Then He used the metaphor to warn His disciples (every branch *in me*) :

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. If a

²⁵ Gen 3:18, Lev 26:33, Deut 29:20ff, Isa 5:1-7, 7:23, 32:12f, Jer 25:8ff, Hos 9:6, 10:8, Luke 13:6-8

²⁶ Some commentators argue this metaphor shows that the people the author has in mind are not true Christians; they are barren land, not fruitful land. But the metaphor was never applied to Gentile nations, only to God’s people. It was a warning to repent lest God poured out the covenant judgement against His covenant people.

man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.” (John 15:1-6)

Fruitfulness is rewarded with care that produces more fruitfulness, whereas fruitlessness results in a judgement symbolised by burning.²⁷

Paul was very conscious of this, (he uses the same word, translated *worthless* in Heb 6:8 and *disqualified* in 1Co 9:27): “I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be *disqualified* for the prize”, and “If a mans work is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames” (1Co 3:15).

Notice that none of these passages say a fruitless *person* will be burned. The burning exists in the metaphors to represent something else: the removal of bad fruit and the end of the possibility of fruitfulness. The warning is serious; continuing fruitlessness may result in an irrevocable judgement against us so that at the judgement seat of Christ we are saved, but “only as by fire.”

²⁷ This passage is often used to describe suffering or difficulties which God uses to make us more fruitful. The author of the letter to the Hebrews refers to this process as chastening (Chapter 12), but I am not convinced that is how Jesus meant us to take His imagery in John 15. Pruning is more likely a reference to the care and attention God gives to fruitful believers to enhance and multiply their fruitfulness. It reflects God’s promise to Abraham, “In multiplying I will multiply you.” where there is no hint of chastening. Chastening is reserved for the fruitless branches that are cut off and burnt.

The parable of the soils

There is perhaps a parallel between this passage and the parable of the soils. The people represented by the stony and thorny soils in the parable could be the same fruitless people this passage addresses. Some say that these people have a non-saving faith, but that is not what Jesus said. Only the wayside seed was taken by Satan “lest they should believe and be saved.” The rest grew, but some stumbled and some became unfruitful. Jesus does not say they were unsaved nor that they lost their salvation (See Lk 8:12ff).²⁸ The parable is a warning to grow in faith lest a person’s life become unfruitful. This is exactly in line with the message of Hebrews.

Conclusion

My conclusion is that the author, mirroring the warnings previously given through quoting Psalm 95, is again warning about fruitlessness amongst God’s people leading to the possibility of incurring God’s curse.

The context of Hebrews 6:1-8

At no point up to now has the author expressed concern over false believers or those who have not yet finally committed themselves to Christ. He is writing *to* believers about themselves, urging them to heed the fullness of the gospel and press on into the promised rest and inherit all God has promised. It makes complete sense for him to warn lagging believers, as he has already done several times, lest they find themselves barred from progress or perhaps even falling away.

²⁸ The word Jesus used for “stumbled” in the parable is the same word He used to describe his disciples who denied Him after his arrest. His disciples stumbled under pressure, just as He had warned in this parable. Who would dare say they were not saved?

We should also note that at no point so far have we encountered a threat of loss of salvation to those who fail to heed these warnings. Even a believer who falls away to the degree that they crucify Christ again are not threatened with the withdrawal of their salvation. We are warned that we cannot renew them to repentance and they are in danger of being cursed, but that is not the same as saying they have lost their salvation. Both Testaments strongly suggest otherwise: those cursed under the Old Covenant were not abandoned by God and Jesus told stories of the prodigal son and the lost sheep showing how the wayward are never rejected.

We observed at the beginning of this chapter how the content of Hebrews 6 really follows directly from Hebrews 4. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 all contain warnings against unbelief amongst God's children and the danger of having God swear an oath against them. There is a clear parallel between the warnings of chapter 6 and those of chapter 4. Both urge progress in faith (4:11, 6:1), both warn against falling (4:11, 6:6) and both warn of the danger of God swearing an oath against the fallen (4:3, 6:8). It seems very likely that the *falling away* of chapter 6 is the same as *failing to enter rest* of chapter 4. Both describe believers who have been faithless and disobedient to such a degree that God has sworn an oath against them preventing any further progress.

His concern throughout has been with failing believers; those who do not press on to maturity, and this is the context of Hebrews 6. He wants them to move on but is troubled that they are still immature, yet he is confident that they will indeed progress. The warning concerns the danger of immaturity.²⁹

²⁹ For a fuller discussion of the question of apostasy of believers and eternal security see the appendix "Eternal Security".

A disobedient believer may be barred from further progress

This all reinforces the line of interpretation I have been following through this chapter.³⁰ Appendix 2 outlines various other interpretations that have been offered, but I find none of them at all persuasive. The author is saying that genuine believers who fall into serious sin or stubborn unbelief will be unfruitful and are in danger of having God swear an oath against them preventing them from further advancement in their faith. They remain secure in their salvation but cannot inherit the promises. The author's concern is that those who do not move on from the basic doctrines of the faith are vulnerable to such falling away and so urges his readers to move on in their understanding and obedience through persevering faith.

Peter makes a remarkably similar appeal:

“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who **called us** (3:1) by his own glory and goodness.⁴ Through these **he has given us his very great and precious promises** (4:1), so that through them you may **participate in the divine nature** (3:14, 4:10) and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.⁵ For this very reason, **make every effort** (4:11, 6:11) to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge;⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, **perseverance** (6:12); and to perseverance, godliness;⁷ and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.⁸ For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will **keep you from being ineffective and unproductive** (6:7,12) in your knowledge of our

³⁰ This view has been presented by Haan, Hodges, Lang and McGee in their various commentaries on Hebrews. See also Gromacki, *Stand Bold in Grace*; Kendall, *Once Saved Always Saved* and Eaton, *A Theology of Encouragement*.

Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ But if anyone does not have them, he is **short-sighted and blind** (5:11), and has forgotten that he has been **cleansed from his past sins** (1:3). ¹⁰ Therefore, my brothers, **be all the more eager** (4:11, 6:11) to **make your calling and election sure** (6:11). For if you do these things, **you will never fall** (4:11), ¹¹ and you will receive a **rich welcome** (6:10) into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” (2Pe 1:3-11)

I have highlighted the phrases which connect especially strongly with Hebrews and added the Hebrews reference in brackets. I hope you can see the strong similarity of thought. It is clear that Peter is addressing Christians, some of whom are in danger of becoming ineffective and unfruitful so that they may fall and suffer an ignoble entry into the eternal kingdom. I suggest that this is the same concern that the writer to the Hebrews has and this is the meaning of Hebrews 6:1-8.

The dangers of sticking to the basics

Christians who are only ever taught the basic doctrines of the gospel are unlikely to be mature enough to withstand the temptations and sufferings of the world and may fall from faith. Troubles and disappointment are experienced by all believers. Sometimes we mistake God’s will for us and suffer the consequences of pursuing the wrong goals. Sometimes we get discouraged that the promises are not quickly or easily inherited. Sometimes we are perplexed at God’s ways which do not match our expectations. Sometimes we are drawn to the instant reward of sin because the reward of righteousness seems so distant. If we harden our hearts and turn away from the living God we will not come into the promised rest. If we give up on God’s promises or persist in unbelief or disobedience we are in danger of being cursed and finding ourselves beyond restoration.

For those who have already experienced the grace of the gospel, the power of the Word, the presence of the Holy Spirit and seen answers to prayer there is nothing one can tell them or show them that they have not already experienced. They may be beyond our reach and, if God should judge their unbelief with an oath, they can never be restored to a fruitful life.

This, it seems to me, is the concern of the author. It is what he has been writing about from the beginning of his letter. Chapter 6 is not a digression into considering the fate of backsliders, it is a further plea for his readers to give close and careful attention to the whole depth of New Covenant promises. He is urging his readers not to settle down in the “wilderness” where the people were saved and free and secure in God, but not yet experiencing the fullness of His promises. The warning of chapter 6 is against those who are content to stay where they are and not move on. His warning is not aimed at those who fall away (it is too late to warn them) it is aimed at those who have made a good start, but because of immaturity are *in danger* of falling away.

Many people have spent so long arguing over whether the people described in Hebrews 6 are truly saved and if a truly saved person can lose their salvation, that they have completely missed the author’s point. Taking the passage in its context we can see that the author’s concern is with the dangers of immaturity. The lesson he wants us to learn concerns the sort of teaching we give and receive. He is emphasizing the danger of only teaching the basics. Immature believers easily fall away, so make sure they are given maturing teaching.

The urgent need to progress in our faith

This is the reason the author is writing. He is clearly concerned about the ongoing growth of these believers. He is urging them to give heed to the gospel, to stir up their faith, to show

diligence in entering God's promised rest, to leave behind the constant reiteration of the basics and move on to maturity. The surprising thing for us reading this is that the author is so urgent in his appeal. This is the kind of urgency we are used to hearing from gospel preachers calling sinners to repent and receive salvation. But it is impossible to construe this letter as being addressed to the unsaved.

I have written this book because of the author's urgency in writing to the Hebrew Christians, appealing for them to move on in their faith towards maturity. I think the appeal of this letter should be applied to our churches and our individual lives with clarity and urgency. God wants His people to move on to maturity, to inherit all that He has promised. We must receive the encouragements and heed the warnings. The majority of Christians come to faith before they leave full time education but many fall away during their twenties. Is this due, in part, to inadequate teaching and discipling towards maturity? It seems that many Christian parents hope or assume that their children are being adequately taught at Sunday school, youth groups and church, yet my own experience indicates an alarmingly poor understanding of even the very basics of the faith among Christian teenagers, even those with Christian parents.

The need for Christian maturity is not limited to the young. It cannot be measured in years or even by experience or leadership responsibility. The squabbling that goes on between long standing members of many churches and the distressing number of church leaders who fall into serious sin every year is surely an indication that godliness and Christian maturity do not necessarily come with age or great leadership skills. We all need to take seriously the call to grow in Christlikeness and move into all that God has for us. Abraham has much to teach us about this as we will see in the second half of Hebrews chapter 6.

Questions for discussion and application in Hebrews 6:1-8

- V1-2 Are you secure in the basic doctrines of salvation?
Can you briefly explain the six basic doctrines listed?
Give some examples of “dead works” and “good works” from your own life.
Try to explain as clearly as you can, without using Christian jargon, what your faith in God consists of.
Explain as clearly as you can what will happen on the Day of Judgement.
- V3 Is there anything you think may be preventing you from going on to maturity in your faith?
- V4-5 Describe your experiences of the five signs of Spiritual life listed.
Are you still experiencing these things?
If not, what can you do to refresh your experience of God?
- V6 Are there any promises or commands God has given you which you have given up on? What can you do to restore your faith and obedience?
What trials of faith are you now facing? How can you be strengthened?
Who are you praying for to return to their faith?
Do you have reason to believe God has sworn an oath against them? – If not, there is much hope.
- V7-8 What is God saying to you? What blessings are you enjoying?

Are you concerned about unfruitfulness in your own or another person's life?

What do you think is the cause? (Unbelief, hard heart, disobedience, sin...)

What can be done to change this?