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# Apostasy Of True Believers Is Impossible

## John Calvin

### v. 4

**4.***For it is impossible, etc.* This passage has given occasion to many to repudiate this Epistle, especially as the Novatians armed themselves with it to deny pardon to the fallen. Hence those of the Western Church, in particular, refused the authority of this Epistle, because the sect of Novatus annoyed them; and they were not sufficiently conversant in the truth so as to be equal to refute it by argument. But when the design of the Apostle is understood, it then appears evident that there is nothing here which countenances so delirious an error. Some who hold sacred the authority of the Epistle, while they attempt to dissipate this absurdity, yet do nothing but evade it. For some take “impossible” in the sense of rare or difficult, which is wholly different from its meaning. Many confine it to that repentance by which the catechumens in the ancient Church were wont to be prepared for baptism, as though indeed the Apostles prescribed fasting, or such things to the baptized. And then what great thing would the Apostle have said, by denying that repentance, the appendage of baptism, could be repeated? He threatens with the severest vengeance of God all those who would cast away the grace which had been once received; what weight would the sentence have had to shake the secure and the wavering with terror, if he only reminded them that there was no longer room for their first repentance? For this would extend to every kind of offense. What then is to be said? Since the Lord gives the hope of mercy to all without exception, it is wholly unreasonable that any one for any cause whatever should be precluded.

The knot of the question is in the word, *fall away.* Whosoever then understands its meaning, can easily extricate himself from every difficulty. But it must be noticed, that there is a twofold falling away, one particular, and the other general. He who has in anything, or in any ways offended, has fallen away from his state as a Christian; therefore all sins are so many fallings. But the Apostle speaks not here of theft, or perjury, or murder, or drunkenness, or adultery; but he refers to a total defection or falling away from the Gospel, when a sinner offends not God in some one thing, but entirely renounces his grace.

And that this may be better understood, let us suppose a contrast between the gifts of God, which he has mentioned, and this falling away. For he falls away who forsakes the word of God, who extinguishes its light, who deprives himself of the taste of the heavens or gift, who relinquishes the participation of the Spirit. Now this is wholly to renounce God. We now see whom he excluded from the hope of pardon, even the apostates who alienated themselves from the Gospel of Christ, which they had previously embraced, and from the grace of God; and this happens to no one but to him who sins against the Holy Spirit. For he who violates the second table of the Law, or transgresses the first through ignorance, is not guilty of this defection; nor does God surely deprive any of his grace in such a way as to leave them none remaining except the reprobate.

If any one asks why the Apostle makes mention here of such apostasy while he is addressing believers, who were far off from a perfidy so heinous; to this I answer, that the danger was pointed out by him in time, that they might be on their guard. And this ought to be observed; for when we turn aside from the right way, we not only excuse to others our vices, but we also impose on ourselves. Satan stealthily creeps on us, and by degrees allures us by clandestine arts, so that when we go astray we know not that we are going astray. Thus gradually we slide, until at length we rush headlong into ruin. We may observe this daily in many. Therefore the Apostle does not without reason forewarn all the disciples of Christ to beware in time; for a continued torpor commonly ends in lethargy, which is followed by alienation of mind.

But we must notice in passing the names by which he signalizes the knowledge of the Gospel. He calls it *illumination;* it hence follows that men are blind, until Christ, the light of the world, enlightens them. He calls it *a tasting of the heavenly gift;* intimating that the things which Christ confers on us are above nature and the world, and that they are yet tasted by faith. He calls it the *participation* of the Spirit; for he it is who distributes to every one, as he wills, all the light and knowledge which he can have; for without him no one can say that Jesus is the Lord, (1Co 12:3;) he opens for us the eyes of our minds, and reveals to us the secret things of God. He calls it a *tasting of the good word of God;* by which he means, that the will of God is therein revealed, not in any sort of way, but in such a way as sweetly to delight us; in short, by this title is pointed out the difference between the Law and the Gospel; for that has nothing but severity and condemnation, but this is a sweet testimony of God’s love and fatherly kindness towards us. And lastly, he calls it a *tasting of the powers of the world to come;* by which he intimates, that we are admitted by faith as it were into the kingdom of heaven, so that we see in spirit that blessed immortality which is hid from our senses. **(97)**

Let us then know, that the Gospel cannot be otherwise rightly known than by the illumination of the Spirit, and that being thus drawn away from the world, we are raised up to heaven, and that knowing the goodness of God we rely on his word.

But here arises a new question, how can it be that he who has once made such a progress should afterwards fall away? For God, it may be said, calls none effectually but the elect, and Paul testifies that they are really his sons who are led by his Spirit, (Rom 8:14;) and he teaches us, that it is a sure pledge of adoption when Christ makes us partakers of his Spirit. The elect are also beyond the danger of finally falling away; for the Father who gave them to be preserved by Christ his Son is greater than all, and Christ promises to watch over them all so that none may perish. To all this I answer, That God indeed favors none but the elect alone with the Spirit of regeneration, and that by this they are distinguished from the reprobate; for they are renewed after his image and receive the earnest of the Spirit in hope of the future inheritance, and by the same Spirit the Gospel is sealed in their hearts. But I cannot admit that all this is any reason why he should not grant the reprobate also some taste of his grace, why he should not irradiate their minds with some sparks of his light, why he should not give them some perception of his goodness, and in some sort engrave his word on their hearts. Otherwise, where would be the temporal faith mentioned by Mar 4:17 ? There is therefore some knowledge even in the reprobate, which afterwards vanishes away, either because it did not strike roots sufficiently deep, or because it withers, being choked up. **(98)**

And by this bridle the Lord keeps us in fear and humility; and we certainly see how prone human nature is otherwise to security and foolish confidence. At the same time our solicitude ought to be such as not to disturb the peace of conscience. For the Lord strengthens faith in us, while he subdues our flesh: and hence he would have faith to remain and rest tranquilly as in a safe haven; but he exercises the flesh with various conflicts, that it may not grow wanton through idleness.

**(97)** See Appendix T.

**(98)** See Appendix U.

### v. 6

**6.***To renew them again into repentance, etc.* Though this seems hard, yet there is no reason to charge God with cruelty when any one suffers only the punishment of his own defection; nor is this inconsistent with other parts of Scripture, where God’s mercy is offered to sinners as soon as they sigh for it, (Eze 18:27;) for repentance is required, which he never truly feels who has once wholly fallen away from the Gospel; for such are deprived, as they deserve, of God’s Spirit and given up to a reprobate mind, so that being the slaves of the devil they rush headlong into destruction. Thus it happens that they cease not to add sin to sin, until being wholly hardened they despise God, or like men in despair, express madly their hatred to him. The end of all apostates is, that they are either smitten with stupor, and fear nothing, or curse God their judge, because they cannot escape from him. **(99)**

In short, the Apostle warns us, that repentance is not at the will of man, but that it is given by God to those only who have not wholly fallen away from the faith. It is a warning very necessary to us, lest by often delaying until tomorrow, we should alienate ourselves more and more from God. The ungodly indeed deceive themselves by such sayings as this, — that it will be sufficient for them to repent of their wicked life at their last breath. But when they come to die, the dire torments of conscience which they suffer, prove to them that the conversion of man is not an ordinary work. As then the Lord promises pardon to none but to those who repent of their iniquity, it is no wonder that they perish who either through despair or contempt, rush on in their obstinacy into destruction. But when any one rises up again after falling, we may hence conclude that he had not been guilty of defection, however grievously he may have sinned.

*Crucifying again, etc.* He also adds this to defend God’s severity against the calumnies of men; for it would be wholly unbecoming, that God by pardoning apostates should expose his own Son to contempt. They are then wholly unworthy to obtain mercy. But the reason why he says, that Christ would thus be crucified again, is, because we die with him for the very purpose of living afterwards a new life; when therefore any return as it were unto death, they have need of another sacrifice, as we shall find in the tenth chapter. Crucifying *for themselves* means as far as in them lies. For this would be the case, and Christ would be slandered as it were triumphantly, were it allowed men to return to him after having fallen away and forsaken him.

**(99)** Some render the verb “renew” actively, in this way, — “For it is impossible as to those who have been once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and have been made partakers of holy spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the world to come, and have fallen away, to renew them again unto repentance, since they crucify again as to themselves to Son of God, and expose him to open shame.”

This is more consistent with the foregoing, for the Apostle speaks of teaching. It is as though he had said “It is impossible for us as teachers;” as they had no commission. To “renew” may be rendered to “restore.” It is only found here, but is used by the Sept. for a verb which means renewing in the sense of restoring. See Psa 103:5; Lam 5:21. Josephus applies it to the renovation or restoration of the temple. The “crucifying” was what they did by falling away; for they thereby professed that he deserved to be crucified as an imposter, and thus counted his blood, as it is said in Heb 10:29, “unholy,” as the blood of a malefactor; and they thus also exhibited him as an object of public contempt. — *Ed*.

### v. 7

**7.***For the earth, etc.* This is a similitude most appropriate to excite a desire to make progress in due time, for as the earth cannot bring forth a good crop in harvest except it causes the seed as soon as it is sown to germinate, so if we desire to bring forth good fruit, as soon as the Lord sows his word, it ought to strike roots in us without delay; for it cannot be expected to fructify, if it be either choked or perish. But as the similitude is very suitable, so it must be wisely applied to the design of the Apostle.

The earth, he says, which by sucking in the rain immediately produces a blade suitable to the seed sown, at length by God’s blessing produces a ripe crop; so they who receive the seed of the Gospel into their hearts and bring forth genuine shoots, will always make progress until they produce ripe fruit. On the contrary, the earth, which after culture and irrigation brings, forth nothing but thorns, affords no hope of a harvest; nay, the more that grows which is its natural produce, the more hopeless is the case. Hence the only remedy the husbandman has is to burn up the noxious and useless weeds. So they who destroy the seed of the Gospel either by their indifference or by corrupt affections, so as to manifest no sign of good progress in their life, clearly show themselves to be reprobates, from whom no harvest can be expected.

The Apostle then not only speaks here of the fruit of the Gospel, but also exhorts us promptly and gladly to embrace it, and he further tells us, that the blade appears presently after the seed is sown, and that growing follows the daily irrigations. Some renderθοτάνην εὔθετὸν “a seasonable shoot,” others, “a shoot meet;” either meaning suits the place; the first refers to time, the second to quality. **(100)** The allegorical meanings with which interpreters have here amused themselves, I pass by, as they are quite foreign to the object of the writer.

**(100)** The wordβοτάνη here means everything the earth produces service for food. It only occurs here in the New Testament, but is commonly used by the Sept. for עשב, which has the same extensive meaning: fruit or fruits would be its best rendering here. The wordεὔθετος is also found in Luk 9:62; and it means fit, meet, suitable, or useful; and the last is the meaning given it here by Grotius, Schleusner, Stuart, Bloomfield, and others. It is indeed true that it is used in the Sept. in the sense of seasonable. See Psa 32:6 — *Ed*

### v. 9

**9.***But we are persuaded, etc.* As the preceding sentences were like thunderbolts, by which readers might have been struck dead, it was needful to mitigate this severity. He therefore says now, that he did not speak in this strain, as though he entertained such an opinion of them. And doubtless whosoever wishes to do good by teaching, ought so to treat his disciples as ever to add encouragement to them rather than to diminish it, for there is nothing that can alienate us more from attending to the truth than to see that we are deemed to be past hope. The Apostle then testifies that he thus warned the Jews, because he had a good hope of them, and was anxious to lead them to salvation. We hence conclude, that not only the reprobate ought to be reproved severely and with sharp earnestness, but also the elect themselves, even those whom we deem to be the children of God.

## John Gill

### v. 4

**For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened**,.... The Syriac and Ethiopic versions render it, "baptized"; and the word is thought to be so used in Heb 10:32. And indeed baptism was called very early "illumination" by the ancients, as by Justin Martyr {i}, and Clemens Alexandrinus {k}, because only enlightened persons were the proper subjects of it; and the word once here used seems to confirm this sense, since baptism, when rightly administered, was not repeated; but then this sense depends upon an use of a word, which it is not certain did as yet obtain; nor does the apostle take notice of baptism in a parallel place, Heb 10:26. This gave rise to, and seems to favour the error of Novatus, that those who fall into sin after baptism are to be cut off from the communion of the church, and never more to be restored unto it; contrary to the promises of God to returning backsliders, and contrary to facts, as well as to the directions of Christ, and his apostles, to receive and restore such persons; and such a notion tends to set aside the intercession of Christ for fallen believers, and to plunge them into despair: it is better therefore to retain the word "enlightened", in its proper sense, and to understand it of persons enlightened with Gospel knowledge; there are some who are savingly enlightened by the Spirit of God, to see the impurity of their hearts and actions, and their impotency to perform that which is good, the imperfection of their own righteousness to justify them, their lost state and condition by nature, and to see Christ and salvation by him, and their interest in it; and these being "once" enlightened, never become darkness, or ever so fall as to perish; for if God had a mind to destroy them, he would never have shown them these things, and therefore cannot be the persons designed here; unless we render the words, as the Syriac version does, "it is impossible"----Nwjxy bwtd, "that they should sin again"; so as to die spiritually, lose the grace of God, and stand in need of a new work upon them, which would be impossible to be done: but rather such are meant, who are so enlightened as to see the evil effects of sin, but not the evil that is in sin; to see the good things which come by Christ, but not the goodness that is in Christ; so as to reform externally, but not to be sanctified internally; to have knowledge of the Gospel doctrinally, but not experimentally; yea, to have such light into it, as to be able to preach it to others, and yet be destitute of the grace of God:

**and have tasted of the heavenly gift**; either faith, or a justifying righteousness, or the pardon of sin, or eternal life; which are all spiritual and heavenly gifts of grace, and which true believers have real tastes of; and hypocrites please themselves with, having some speculative notions about them, and some desires after them, arising from a natural principle of self-love. Some think the Holy Ghost is intended; but rather Christ himself, the unspeakable gift of God's love, given from heaven, as the bread of life. Now there are some who have a saving spiritual taste of this gift; for though God's people, while unregenerate, have no such taste; their taste is vitiated by sin, and it is not changed; sin is the food they live upon, in which they take an imaginary pleasure, and disrelish every thing else; but when regenerated, their taste is changed, sin is rendered loathsome to them; and they have a real gust of spiritual things, and especially of Christ, and find a real delight and pleasure in feeding by faith upon him; whereby they live upon him, and are nourished up unto eternal life, and therefore cannot be the persons here spoken of: but there are others who taste, but dislike what they taste; have no true love to Christ, and faith in him; or have only a carnal taste of him, know him only after the flesh, or externally, not inwardly and experimentally; or they have only a superficial taste, such as is opposed to eating the flesh, and drinking the blood of Christ, by faith, which is proper to true believers; the gust they have is but temporary, and arises from selfish principles.

**And were made partakers of the Holy Ghost**; not his person, nor his special grace; there are some who so partake of him, as to be united to him, in whom he becomes the principle of spiritual life, and motion: such have the fruits of the Spirit, and communion with him; they enjoy his personal presence and inhabitation in them; they have received him as a spirit of illumination and conviction, of regeneration and sanctification, as the spirit of faith, and as a comforter; and as a spirit of adoption, and the earnest and seal of future glory; but then such can never so fall away as to perish: a believer indeed may be without the sensible presence of the Spirit; the graces of the Spirit may be very low, as to their exercise; and they may not enjoy his comforts, gracious influences, and divine assistance; but the Spirit of God never is, in the above sense, in a castaway; where he takes up his dwelling, he never quits it; if such could perish, not only his own glory, but the glory of the Father, and of the Son, would be lost likewise: but by the Holy Ghost is sometimes meant the gifts of the Spirit, ordinary or extraordinary,

 1Co 12:4 and so here; and men may be said to be partakers of the Holy Ghost, to whom he gives wisdom and prudence in things natural and civil; the knowledge of things divine and evangelical, in an external way; the power of working miracles, of prophesying, of speaking with tongues, and of the interpretation of tongues; for the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Ghost seem chiefly designed, which some, in the first times of the Gospel, were partakers of, who had no share in special grace, Mt 7:22.

{i} Apolog. 2. p. 94. {k} Paedagog. l. 1. c. 6. p. 93.

### v. 5

**And have tasted the good word of God**,.... Not the Lord Jesus Christ, the essential Word of God, who seems to be intended before by the heavenly gift; but rather, either the Scriptures of truth in general, which are the word of God, endited by him, and contain his mind and will; which he makes use of for conviction, conversion, instruction, and comfort; and which are preserved by him: and these are a good word; they come from him who is good; they are a revelation of good things; they make known things true, pleasant, and profitable: or else the Gospel in particular, of which God is the author; and in which is a wonderful display of his wisdom and grace; and which he owns and blesses for his own glory, and the good of others: and this is a "good word", the same with דבר טוב, "good matter", or "word", in Ps 45:1 פתגם טובי, "my good word", or "the word of my goodness", in the Targum on Isa 55:11 for it is the word of righteousness, reconciliation, peace, pardon, life, and salvation. And there is a special and spiritual taste of this good, word, which is delightful, relishing, and nourishing; and such who have it can never totally and finally fall away; because they who taste it, so as to eat and digest it, and be nourished by it, to them it becomes the ingrafted word, which is able to save them: but there is such a taste of this word as is disrelishing, as in profane sinners, and open opposers and persecutors of the word, or as in hypocrites and formal professors; which is only an assent to the Scriptures, as the revelation of God, or a superficial knowledge of the doctrines of the Gospel without the experience of them, and a temporal faith in them, and a natural affection for them, and pleasure with them for a time; as the Jews, and Herod with John's ministry, and the stony ground hearers.

**And the powers of the world to come**; meaning either the state of the church, and the glorious things relating to it, after the first resurrection, which they might have some notional apprehensions of; or the ultimate state of glory and happiness, the powers of which are the immortality, incorruption, and glory of the body, the perfect holiness and knowledge of the soul, entire freedom from all evils of every kind, full communion with Father, Son, and Spirit, and a complete enjoyment of all happiness for ever; which hypocrites may have a notional knowledge of, a natural desire after, and delight in the contemplation and hope of, as Balaam had; or rather the δυναμεις, miracles and mighty works in the former part of the Gospel dispensation, or times of the Messiah, the Jews' world to come, [See comments on Heb 2:5], are intended; which many, as Judas and others, were able to perform, who were not sincere Christians, or true believers.

### v. 6

**If they shall fall away**,.... This is not supposed of true believers, as appears from Heb 6:9 nor is it to be supposed of them that they may fall totally and finally; they may indeed fall, not only into afflictions and temptations, but into sin; and from a lively and comfortable exercise of grace, and from a degree of steadfastness in the Gospel; but not irrecoverably: for they are held and secured by a threefold cord, which can never be broken; by God the Father, who has loved them with an everlasting love, has chosen them in Christ, secured them in the covenant of grace, keeps them by his power, has given them grace, and will give them glory; and by the Son, who has undertook for them, redeemed and purchased them, prays and makes preparations in heaven for them, they are built on him, united to him, and are his jewels, whom he will preserve; and by the Holy Ghost, whose grace is incorruptible, whose personal indwelling is for ever, who himself is the earnest and seal of the heavenly inheritance, and who having begun, will finish the good work of grace: but falling away, so as to perish, may be supposed, and is true of many professors of religion; who may fall from the profession of the Gospel they have made, and from the truth of it, and into an open denial of it; yea, into an hatred and persecution of what they once received the external knowledge of; and so shall fall short of heaven, and into condemnation: for,

**to renew them again unto repentance**, is a thing impossible: by "repentance" is meant, not baptism of repentance; nor admission to a solemn form of public repentance in the church; nor a legal repentance, but an evangelical one: and so to be "renewed" unto it is not to be baptized again, or to be restored anew to the church by repentance, and absolution; but must be understood either of renovation of the soul, in order to repentance; or of the reforming of the outward conversation, as an evidence of it; or of a renewing of the exercise of the grace of repentance and to be renewed "again" to repentance does not suppose that persons may have true repentance and lose it; for though truly penitent persons may lose the exercise of this grace for a time, yet the grace itself can never be lost: moreover, these apostates before described had only a show of repentance, a counterfeit one; such as Cain, Pharaoh, and Judas had; and consequently, the renewing of them again to repentance, is to that which they only seemed to have, and to make pretensions unto; now to renew them to a true repentance, which they once made a profession of, the apostle says is a thing "impossible": the meaning of which is not only that it is difficult; or that it is rare and unusual; or that it is unsuitable and improper; but it is absolutely impossible: it is impossible to these men to renew themselves to repentance; renovation is the work of the Holy Ghost, and not of man; and repentance is God's gift, and not in man's power; and it is impossible for ministers to renew them, to restore and bring them back, by true repentance; yea, it is impossible to God himself, not through any impotence in him, but from the nature of the sin these men are guilty of; for by the high, though outward attainments they arrive unto, according to the description of them, their sin is the sin against the Holy Ghost, for which no sacrifice can be offered up, and of which there is no remission, and so no repentance; for these two go together, and for which prayer is not to be made; see

 Mt 12:32 and chiefly because to renew such persons to repentance, is repugnant to the determined will of God, who cannot go against his own purposes and resolutions; and so the Jews {l} speak of repentance being withheld by God from Pharaoh, and, from the people of Israel; of which they understand Ex 9:16 and say, that when the holy blessed God withholds repentance from a sinner, אינו יכול לשוב, "he cannot repent"; but must die in his wickedness which he first committed of his own will; and they further observe {m}, that he that profanes the name of God has it not in his power to depend on repentance, nor can his iniquity be expiated on the day of atonement, or be removed by chastisement:

**seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh**; who is truly and properly God, begotten of the Father, and of the same nature with him, in whom he greatly delights; this is Christ's highest name and title; and it was for asserting himself to be the Son of God that he was crucified; and his being so puts an infinite virtue in his sufferings and death; and it heightens the sin of the Jews, and of these apostates, in crucifying him. He was once crucified, and it is both impossible and unnecessary that he should be, properly speaking, "crucified afresh", or "again"; it is impossible, because he is risen from the dead, and will never die more; it is unnecessary, because he has finished and completed what he suffered the death of the cross for; but men may be said to crucify him again, when, by denying him to be the Son of God, they justify the crucifixion of him on that account; and when they lessen and vilify the virtue of his blood and sacrifice; and when both by errors and immoralities they cause him to be blasphemed, and evil spoken of; and when they persecute him in his members: and this may be said to be done "to themselves afresh"; not that Christ was crucified for them before, but that they now crucify him again, as much as in them lies; or "with themselves", in their own breasts and minds, and to their own destruction. Now this being the case, it makes their renewal to repentance impossible; because, as before observed, the sin they commit is unpardonable; it is a denial of Christ, who gives repentance; and such who sin it must arrive to such hardness of heart as to admit of no repentance; and it is just with God to give up such to a final impenitence, as those, who knowingly and out of malice and envy crucified Christ, had neither pardon nor repentance; and besides, this sin of denying Christ to be the Son of God, and Saviour of men, after so much light and knowledge, precludes the way of salvation, unless Christ was to be crucified again, which is impossible; for so the Syriac version connects this clause with the word "impossible", as well as a foregoing one, rendering it, "it is impossible to crucify the Son of God again, and to put him to shame"; and so the Arabic version. Christ was put to open shame at the time of his apprehension, prosecution, and crucifixion; and so he is by such apostates, who, was he on earth, would treat him in the same manner the Jews did; and who do traduce him as an impostor and a deceiver, and give the lie to his doctrines, and expose him by their lives, and persecute him in his saints.

{l} Maimon. Hilchot. Teshuba, c. 6. sect. 3. {m} Vid. R. David Kimchi in Isa. xxii. 14.

### v. 7

**For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it**,.... Here the apostle illustrates what he had before been speaking of, by a simile taken from the earth, to which men in general answer, who are of the earth; earthy and unregenerate men and carnal professors are of earthly minds; they are like the earth when it was rude and without form, and cursed by God; and are as insensible as the earth: but the earth is particularly distinguished into that which is fruitful, and which is unfruitful; and the former is spoken of in this verse, to which true believers in Christ agree; who are the good ground, into which the seed of God's word is received, and brings forth fruit; these are God's tillage or husbandry: and the "rain" that comes upon them may signify either the grace of Christ, which, like rain, is an instance of his sovereignty, and what he alone can give, and not the vanities of the Gentiles; and which he gives to persons undeserving of it; and which refreshes, revives, and makes fruitful: or else Christ himself,

 Ps 72:6 whose first coming was like rain much desired, and long expected; and so is his spiritual coming very desirable, delightful, refreshing, and fructifying: or rather his Gospel,

 De 32:2 which comes from above, and is the means of softening hard hearts, of reviving distressed and disconsolate minds, and of making barren souls fruitful; which is done by coming "oft" upon them, at first conversion, and afterwards, alluding to the former and latter rain; and may refer to the receiving of more grace, even grace for grace, out of Christ's fulness, through the ministration of the word, which is drank in by faith, under the influence of the Spirit of God:

**and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed**; God the Father, who is the husbandman, and ministers of the Gospel, who arc labourers under him; and where the Gospel comes in power, it brings forth the fruits of the Spirit, the fruits of righteousness, the fruits meet for repentance; and which are to the glory of God the Father, and are answerable to the means be makes use of, the ministry of the word and ordinances; and no man can bring forth fruit without Christ, his Spirit, and grace: and such earth, or those signified by it,

**receiveth blessing from God**; both antecedent to all this, and which is the cause of fruitfulness; and as consequent upon it, for such receive more grace, even all the blessings of grace, and at last the blessing of glory; and all this being in a way of receiving, shows it to be of gift, and of pure grace.

### v. 8

**But that which beareth thorns and briers**,.... To which wicked men answer; who are unfruitful and unprofitable, and are hurtful, pricking and grieving, by their wicked lives and conversations, by their bitter and reproachful words, and by their violent and cruel persecutions; and particularly carnal professors, and especially apostates, such as before described; for to such earth, professors of religion may be compared, who are worldly, slothful, defrauding and overreaching, carnal and wanton; as also heretical men, and such as turn from the faith, deny it, and persecute the saints: and the things or actions produced by them are aptly expressed by "thorns and briers"; such as errors, heresies, and evil works of all kinds; and which show that the seed of the word was never sown in their hearts, and that that which they bear, or throw out, is natural to them: and such earth is

**rejected**; as such men are, both by the church, and by God himself; or "reprobate", as they are concerning the faith, and to every good work; and are given up by God to a reprobate mind: and is "nigh unto cursing"; and such men are cursed already by the law, being under its sentence of curse and condemnation; and are nigh to the execution of it; referring either to the destruction of Jerusalem, which was near at hand; or to the final judgment, when they shall hear, Go, ye cursed:

**whose end is to be burned**; with everlasting and unquenchable fire, in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone.

### v. 9

**But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you**,.... The apostle addresses the believing Hebrews, as "beloved"; being beloved by the Lord, not as the descendants of Abraham, but as the elect of God, and so as loved with an everlasting love; and which might be known to themselves, by its being shed abroad in their hearts, and by their being called by grace, and by their love to him, and to his people: and from hence they might conclude they should not fall away, as the apostates before spoken of; since, in consequence of being beloved by God, they were chosen in Christ unto salvation; Christ was given to die for them; they had the Spirit sent down into their hearts; they were justified, pardoned, and adopted; nor could they be separated from the love of God: and the apostle also so calls them, because they were beloved by him, not merely as being his countrymen, but as saints: and this he says to testify his affection to them; to show that what he said was not from hatred of them, or prejudice to them; and that his exhortations, cautions, and reproofs, might be better taken; and particularly that they might credit what he here says, that he was "persuaded better things" of them, than what he had said of others in Heb 6:4 even such as are expressed in Heb 6:10 he was persuaded they had the true grace of God; whereas the above mentioned persons had only gifts, when in the height of their profession; and the least degree of grace is better than the greatest gifts men can be possessed of: grace makes a man a good man, not gifts; a man may have great gifts and not be a good man; grace is useful to a man's self, gifts are chiefly useful to others; grace makes men fruitful, when gifts leave them barren in the knowledge of Christ; grace is lasting, when gifts fail, and cease and vanish away; grace will abide the fire of persecution, when gifts will not; grace is saving, gifts are not:

**and things that accompany salvation**; which enter into salvation; are ingredients in it, and parts of it, and with which salvation is connected; such as faith, love, c. or which mutually touch or follow one another in the chain of salvation as to be predestinated, justified, called, adopted, sanctified, and, at last, glorified:

**though we thus speak**; concerning others, as in the preceding verses: the hard things spoken by him of some, were consistent with such persuasions in general; for there might be some among them to whom the aforesaid characters belonged; and saying such things might be a means to make others watchful and careful.

## John Owen

### vv. 4-6

**Hebrews 6:4-6**

῞Αδύνατον γάρ τοὺς ἅπαξ φωτισθέντας, γευσαμένους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆςἐπουρανίου, καὶ μετόχους γενηθέντας Πνεύματος ἁγίου, καὶ καλὸν γευσαμένους Θεοῦ ῥῆμα, δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος, καὶ παραπεσόντας, πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν εἰς μετάνοιαν, ἀνασταυροῦντας ἐαυτοῖς τὸν Ψἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ παραδειγματίζοντας.

᾿Αδύνατον γάρ, “impossibile enim;” that is, “est,” — “it is impossible.” Syr., אֶלָּא לָא מֶשְׁכְּחִין, “but they cannot.” This respects the *power* of the persons themselves, and not the *event* of things; it may be not improperly as to the sense. Beza and Erasmus, “fieri non potest,”” it cannot be.” The same with “impossible;” but the use of the word ἀδύνατον in the New Testament, which signifies sometimes only what is very difficult, not what is absolutely denied, makes it useful to retain the same word as in our translation, “for it is impossible.”

Τοὺς ἅπαξ φωτισθέντας. Syr, הָנוּן דָּחֲדָא זְבַן לְמַעֲמוּדִיתָא נְחֵתוּ, “those who one time” (or “once”) “descended unto baptism;” of which interpretation we must speak afterwards. All others, “qui semel fuerint illuminati,” “who were once illuminated.” Only the Ethiopic follows the Syriac. Some read “illustrati,” to the same purpose.

Γευσαμένους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου. Vulg. Lat., “gustaverant etiam donum coeleste;” “etiam” for “et” Others express the article by the pronoun, by reason of its reduplication: “Et gustaverint donum illud coeleste,” “and have tasted of that heavenly gift.” Syr., “the gift that is from heaven.” And this the emphasis in the original seems to require. “And have tasted of that heavenly gift.”

Και, μετόχους γενηθέντας Πςεύματος ἁγίου. “Et participes facti sunt Spiritus Sancti,” Vulg. Lat.; “and are made partakers of the Holy Ghost.” All others, “facti fuerint,” “have been made partakers of the Holy Ghost.” Syr., דְּקוּדְשָׁא רוּחָא, “the Spirit of holiness.”

Καὶ καλὸν γευσαμένους Θεοῦ ῥῆμα. Vulg. Lat., “et gustaverunt nihilominus bonum Dei verbum.” Rhem., “have moreover tasted the good word of God.” But “moreover” doth not express “nihilominus;” [it must be rendered] “and have notwithstanding,” which hath no place here. Καλὸν ῥῆμα, “verbum pulchrum.”

Δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος. “Virtutesque seculi futuri.” Syr., חיְלָא, “vir-tutem,” “the power.” Vulg., “seculi venturi.” We cannot in our language distinguish between “futurum” and “venturum,” and so render it, “the world to come.”

Καὶ παραπεσόντας. Vulg., “et prolapsi sunt.” Rhem., “and are fullen.” Others, “si prolabantur;” which the sense requires, — “if they fall,” that is, “away,” as our translation, properly. Syr., דְּתוּב נֶחְטוּן, “that sin again;” somewhat dangerously, for it is one kind of sinning only that is included and expressed.

Πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν εἰς μετάνοιαν*.* Vulg, “rursus renovari ad poenitentmm, “to be renewed again to repentance,” rendering the active verb passively. So Beza also, “ut denuo renoventur ad resipiscentiam;” “that they should again be renewed to repentance.” The word is active as rendered by ours, “to renew them again to repentance.”

Ανασταυροῦντας ἑαυτοῖς τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ. “Rursum crucifigentes sibimetipsis Filium Dei.” Καὶ παραδειγματίζοντας. Vulg., “et ostentui habentes.” Rhem., “and making him a mockery.” Eras., “ludibrio habentes.” Beza, “ignominim exponentes.” One of late, “ad exemplum Judaeorum excruciant;” “torment him as did the Jews.” [3]

[3] Exposition. — Turner holds that these verses “describe a true Christian condition and character, and recognize the danger, and of course the possibility, of falling therefrom irrecoverably.” The verses, as Owen shows, in his remarks on them in his work on the Perseverance of the Saints, present no small difficulty, even if interpreted according to the Arminian principle of the possible defectibility of the saints; for they would thus imply not merely that a saint may fall away, but, — what no Arminian holds, or at least can hold consistently, — that, once falling away, he cannot be renewed. Doddridge appears to lean to the exegesis of Owen, expounding the privileges and attainments mentioned as not implying a state of grace. Stuart differs from them, and admits that true believers are intended by the apostle, but meets the difficulty thus: “Whatever may be true in the divine purposes, as to the final salvation of all those who are once truly regenerated, — and this doctrine I feel constrained to admit, — yet nothing can be plainer than that the sacred writers have everywhere addressed saints in the same manner as they would address those whom they considered as constantly exposed to fall away and to perish for ever.....God treats Christians as free agents, as rational beings; he guards them against defection, not by mere physical power, but by moral means adapted to their nature as free and rational agents.” — Ed.

**Heb 6:4-6.** — For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they fall away [*for any*] to renew them again to repentance; seeing they crucify again to themselves the Son of God, and put him unto open shame [*or treat him ignominiously*]*.*

That this passage in our apostle’s discourse hath been looked upon as accompanied with great difficulties is known to all; and many have the differences been about its interpretation. For, both doctrinally and practically, sundry have here stumbled and miscarried. It is almost generally agreed upon, that from these words, and the colorable but indeed perverse interpretation and application made of them by some in the primitive times, occasioned by the then present circumstances of things, to be mentioned afterwards, the Latin church was so backward in receiving the epistle itself, that it had not absolutely prevailed therein in the days of Jerome, as we have elsewhere declared. Wherefore it is necessary that we should a little inquire into the occasion of the great contests which have been in the church, almost in all ages, about the sense of this place.

It is known that the primitive church, according to its duty, was carefully watchful about the holiness and upright walking of all that were admitted into the society and fellowship of it. Hence, upon every known and visible failing, they required an open repentance from the offenders before they would admit them unto a participation of the sacred mysteries. But upon flagitious and scandalous crimes, such as murder, adultery, or idolatry, in many churches they would never admit those who had been guilty of them into their communion any more. Their greatest and most signal trial was with respect unto them who, through fear of death, complied with the Gentiles in their idolatrous worship in the time of persecution. For they had fixed no certain general rules whereby they Should unanimously proceed, but every church exercised severity or lenity, according as they saw cause, upon the circumstances of particular instances. Hence Cyprian, in his banishment, would not positively determine concerning those of the church in Carthage who had so sinned and fallen, but deferred his thoughts until his return; when he resolved to advise with the whole church, and settle all things according to the counsel that should be agreed on amongst them. Yea, many of his epistles are on this subject peculiarly; and in them all, if compared together, it is evident that there was no rule agreed upon herein; nor was he himself resolved in his own mind, though strictly on all occasions opposing Novatianus; wherein it had been well if his arguments had answered his zeal. Before this, the church of Rome was esteemed in particular more remiss in their discipline, and more free than other churches in their re-admission unto communion of notorious offenders. Hence Tertullian, in his book de Poenitentia, reflects on Zephyrinus, the bishop of Rome, that he had admitted adulterers unto repentance, and thereby unto the communion of the church. [4]

[4] See quotations from Tertullian, and others, in works, vol. 7. p. 14. — Ed.

But that church proceeding in her lenity, and every day enlarging her charity, Novatus and Novatianus taking offense thereat, advanced an opinion on the contrary extreme. For they denied all hope of church pardon, or of a return unto ecclesiastical communion, unto them who had fallen into open sin after baptism; and, in especial, peremptorily excluded all persons whatsoever who had outwardly complied with idolatrous worship in time of persecution, without respect unto any distinguishing circumstances. Yea, they seem to have excluded them from all expectation of forgiveness from God himself. But their followers, terrified with the uncharitableness and horror of this persuasion, tempered it so far as that, leaving all persons absolutely to the mercy of God upon their repentance, they only denied such as we mentioned before a re-admission into church communion, as Acesius speaks expressly in Socrates, lib. 1. cap. 7. Now this opinion they endeavored to confirm, as from the nature and use of baptism, which was not to be reiterated, whereon they judged that no pardon was to be granted unto them who fell into those sins which they lived in before, and were cleansed from at their baptism; so principally from this place of our apostle, wherein they thought their whole opinion was taught and confirmed. And so usually doth it fall out, very unhappily, with men who think they see some peculiar opinion or persuasion in some *singular text* of Scripture, and will not bring their interpretations of it unto the analogy of faith, whereby they might see how contrary it is to the whole design and current of the word in other places. But the church of Rome, on the other side, though judging rightly, from other directions given in the Scripture, that the Novatians transgressed the rule of charity and gospel discipline in their severities, yet, as it should seem, and is very probable, knew not how to answer the objection from this place of our apostle: therefore did they rather choose for a season to suspend their assent unto the authority of the whole epistle, than to prejudice the church by its admission. And well was it that some learned men afterward, by their sober interpretations of the words, plainly evinced that no countenance was given in them unto the errors of the Novatians; for without this it is much to be feared that some would have preferred their interest in their present controversy before the authority of it: which would, in the issue, have proved ruinous to the truth itself; for the epistle, being designed of God unto the common edification of the church, would at length have prevailed, whatever sense men, through their prejudices and ignorance, should put upon any passages of it. But this controversy is long since buried; the generality of the churches in the world being sufficiently remote from that which was truly the mistake of the Novatians, yea, the most of them do bear peaceably in their communion, without the least exercise of gospel discipline towards them, such persons as concerning whom the dispute was of old whether they should ever in this world be admitted into the communion of the church, although upon their open and professed repentance. We shall not, therefore, at present need to labor in this controversy. But the sense of these words hath been the subject of great contests on other occasions also. For some do suppose and contend that they are *real and true believers* who are deciphered by the apostle, and that their character is given us in and by sundry inseparable adjuncts and properties of such persons. Hence they conclude that such believers may *totally and finally fall from grace,* and perish eternally. Yea, it is evident that this hypothesis, of the final apostasy of true believers, is that which influenceth their minds and judgments to suppose that such are here intended. Wherefore others, who will not admit that, according to the tenor of the covenant of grace in Christ Jesus, true believers can perish everlastingly, do say, that either they are not here intended, or if they are, the words are only comminatory, wherein although the consequence in them in a way of arguing be true, — namely, that on the supposition laid down, the inference is certain, — yet the supposition is not asserted in order unto a certain consequent, whence it should follow that true believers might so really fall away and absolutely perish. And these things have been the matter of many contests among learned men.

Again; there have been sundry mistakes in the *practical application* of the intention of these words unto the consciences of men, mostly made by themselves who are concerned. For whereas, by reason of sin, they have been surprised with terrors and troubles of conscience, they have withal, in their darkness and distress, supposed themselves to be fallen into the condition here described by our apostle, and consequently to be irrecoverably lost. And these apprehensions usually befall men on two occasions. For some having been overtaken with some *great actual sin* against the second table, after they have made a profession of the gospel, and having their consciences harassed with a sense of their guilt (as it will fall out where men are not greatly hardened through the deceitfulness of sin), they judge that they are fallen under the sentence denounced in this scripture against such sinners as they suppose themselves to be, whereby their state is irrecoverable. Others do make the same judgment of themselves, because they have fallen from that constant compliance with their convictions which formerly led them unto a strict performance of duties, and this in some course of long continuance.

Now, whereas it is certain that the apostle in this discourse gives no countenance unto the severity of the Novatians, whereby they excluded offenders everlastingly from the peace and communion of the church; nor to the final apostasy of true believers, which he testifieth against in this very chapter, in compliance with innumerable other testimonies of Scripture to the same purpose; nor doth he teach any thing whereby the conscience of any sinner who desires to return to God, and to find acceptance with him, should be discouraged or disheartened; we must attend unto the exposition of the words in the first place, so as not to break in upon the boundaries of other truths, nor transgress against the analogy of faith. And we shall find that this whole discourse, compared with other scriptures, and freed from the prejudices that men have brought unto it, is both remote from administering any just occasion to the mistakes before- mentioned, and is a needful, wholesome commination, duly to be considered by all professors of the gospel.

In the words we consider, —

**1.** The connection of them unto those foregoing, intimating the occasion of the introduction of this whole discourse.

**2.** The subject described in them, or the persons spoken of, under sundry qualifications, which may be inquired into jointly and severally.

**3.** What is supposed concerning them.

**4.** What is affirmed of them on that supposition.

**FIRST**, The connection of the words is included in the causal conjunction, γὰρ, “for.” It respects the introduction of a reason, for what had been before discoursed, as also of the limitation which the apostle added expressly unto his purpose of making a progress in their further instruction, “If God permit.” And he doth not herein express his judgment that they to whom he wrote were such as he describes, for he afterwards declares that he “hoped better things concerning them;” only it was necessary to give them this caution, that they might take due care not to be such. And whereas he had manifested theft they were slow as to the making of a progress in knowledge and a suitable practice, he lets them here know the danger that there was in continuing in that slothful condition. For not to proceed in the ways of the gospel, and obedience thereunto, is an untoward entrance into a total relinquishment of the one and the other. That therefore they might be acquainted with the danger hereof, and be stirred up to avoid that danger, he gives them an account of those who, after a profession of the gospel, beginning at a non-proficiency under it, do end in apostasy from it. And we may see, that the severest comminations are not only useful in the preaching of the gospel, but exceeding necessary towards persons that are observed to be slothful in their profession.

**SECONDLY**, The description of the persons that are the subject spoken of is given in *five instances* of the evangelical privileges whereof they were made partakers; notwithstanding all which, and against their obliging efficacy to the contrary, it is supposed that they may wholly desert the gospel itself. And some things we may observe concerning this description of them in general; as, —

**1.** The apostle, designing to express the fearful state and judgment of these persons, **describes them by such things as may fully evidence it to be, as *unavoidable,* so *righteous* and equal.** Those things must be some evident privileges and advantages, whereof they were made partakers by the gospel. These being despised in their apostasy, do proclaim their destruction from God to be rightly deserved.

**2.** That all these **privileges do consist in certain especial operations of the Holy Ghost, which were peculiar unto the dispensation of the gospel,** such as they neither were nor could be made partakers of in their Judaism. For *the* Spirit,” in this sense, was not “received by the works of the law, but by the hearing of faith,” Gal 2:2; and this was a testimony unto them that they were delivered from the bondage of the law, namely, by a participation of that Spirit which was the great privilege of the gospel.

**3.** Here is **no express mention of any covenant grace or mercy** in them or towards them, nor of any duty of faith or obedience which they had performed. Nothing of justification, sanctification, or adoption, is expressly assigned unto them. Afterwards, when he comes to declare his hope and persuasion concerning these Hebrews, that they were not such as those whom he had before described, nor such as would so fall away unto perdition, he doth it upon three grounds, whereon they were differenced from them: as, —

**(1.)** That they had such things as did “accompany salvation;” that is, such as salvation is inseparable from. None of these things, therefore, had he ascribed unto those whom he describeth in this place; for if he had so done, they would not have been unto him an argument and evidence of a contrary end, that these should not fall away and perish as well as those. Wherefore he ascribes nothing to these here in the text that doth peculiarly “accompany salvation,” Heb 6:9.

**(2.)** He describes them by their *duties of obedience* and fruits of faith. This was their “work and labor of love” towards the name of God, verse 10. And hereby, also, doth he difference them from these in the text, concerning whom he supposeth that they may perish eternally, which these fruits of saving faith and sincere love cannot do.

**(3.)** He adds, that in the **preservation of those there mentioned the *faithfulness of God* was concerned**: “God is not unrighteous to forget.”

For they were such he intended as were interested in the covenant of grace, with respect whereunto alone there is any engagement on the faithfulness or righteousness of God to preserve men from apostasy and ruin; and there is so with an equal respect unto all who are so taken into the covenant. **But of these in the text he supposeth no such thing; and thereupon doth not intimate that either the righteousness or faithfulness of God was any way engaged for their preservation**, but rather the contrary. The whole description, therefore, refers unto some especial gospel privileges, which professors in those days were promiscuously made partakers of; and what they were in particular we must in the next place inquire: —

#### once enlightened

**1.** The *first* thing in the description is, that they were ἅπαξ φωτισθέντες, “once enlightened;*”* saith the Syriac translation, as we observed, “once baptized.” It is very certain that, early in the church, baptism was called φωτισμός, “illumination;*”* and φωτίζειν, “to enlighten,” was used for “to baptize.” And the set times wherein they solemnly administered that ordinance were called ἡμέραι τῶν φωτῶν, “the days of light.” Hereunto the Syriac interpreter seems to have had respect. And the word ἅπαξ, “once,” may give countenance hereunto. Baptism was once only to be celebrated, according to the constant faith of the churches in all ages. And **they called baptism “illumination,” because it being one ordinance of the initiation of persons into a participation of all the mysteries of the church**, they were thereby translated out of the kingdom of darkness into that of grace and light. And it seems to give further countenance hereunto, in that baptism really was the beginning and foundation of a participation of all the other spiritual privileges that are mentioned afterwards. For it was usual in those times, that upon the baptizing of persons, the Holy Ghost came upon them, and endowed them with extraordinary gifts, peculiar to the days of the gospel, as we have showed in our consideration of the order between “baptism” and “imposition of hands.” And this opinion hath so much of probability in it, having nothing therewithal unsuited to the analogy of faith or design of the place, that I should embrace it, if the word itself, as here used, did not require another interpretation. For it was a good while after the writing of this epistle, and all other parts of the New Testament, at least an age or two, if not more, before this word was used *mystically* to express baptism. In the whole Scripture it hath another sense, denoting an inward operation of the Spirit, and not the outward administration of an ordinance. And it is too much boldness, to take a word in a peculiar sense in one single place, diverse from its proper signification and constant use, if there be no circumstances in the text forcing us thereunto, as here are not. And for the word ἅπαξ, “**once,” it is not to be restrained unto this particular, but refers equally unto all the instances that follow, signifying no more but that those mentioned were really and truly partakers of them.**

Φωτίζομαι*,* is “to give light or knowledge by teaching;” — the same with הוֹרֶה, which, therefore, is so translated ofttimes by the Greeks; as by Aquila, Exo 4:12; Psa 119:33; Pro 4:4; Isa 27:11, as Drusius observes. And it is so by the LXX., Jdg 13:8; 2Ki 12:2; 2Ki 17:27. Our apostle useth it for “to make manifest;” that is, “bring to light,” 1Co 4:5, 2Ti 1:10. And the meaning of it, Joh 1:9, where we render it “lighteth,” is to teach. And φωτισμός is “**knowledge upon instruction**:” 2Co 4:4, Εἰς τὸ μὴ αὐγάσαι αὐτοῖς τὸν φωτισμὸν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, — “That the light of the gospel should not shine into them;” that is, the knowledge of it. So 2Co 4:6, Πρὸς φωτισμὸν τῆς γνώσεως, — “The light of the knowledge.” **Wherefore to be “enlightened,” in this place, is to be instructed in the doctrine of the gospel, so as to have a spiritual apprehension thereof.** And this is so termed on a double account: —

**(1.)** Of the *object,* or the things known and apprehended. For “life and immortality are brought to light by the gospel,” 2Ti 1:10. Hence it is called “light;” “the inheritance of the saints in light.” And the state which men are thereby brought into is so called in opposition to the darkness that is in the world without it, 1Pe 2:9. The world without the gospel is the kingdom of Satan: ῾Ο κόσμος ὅλος ἐν τῷ πονηρῷ κεῖται, 1Jn 5:19. The whole of the world, and all that belongs unto it, in distinction and opposition unto the new creation, is under the power of the wicked one, the prince of the power of darkness, and so is full of darkness. It is τόπος αὐχμηρός, 2Pe 1:19; *—* “a dark place,” wherein ignorance, folly, error, and superstition do dwell and reign. By the power and efficacy of this darkness are men kept at a distance from God, and know not whither they go. This is called “walking in darkness,” 1Jn 1:6; whereunto “walking in the light,” that is, the knowledge of God in Christ by the gospel, is opposed, 1Jn 1:7. On this account is our instruction in the knowledge of the gospel called “illumination,” because itself is light.

**(2.)** On the account of the *subject,* or the mind itself, whereby the gospel is apprehended. For the knowledge which is received thereby expels that darkness, ignorance, and confusion, which the mind before was filled and possessed withal. The knowledge, I say, of the doctrine of the gospel, concerning the person of Christ, of God’s being in him reconciling the world unto himself, of his offices, work, and mediation, and the like heads of divine revelation, doth set up a *spiritual light* in the minds of men, enabling them to discern what before was utterly hid from them, whilst “alienated from the life of God through their ignorance.” Of this light and knowledge there are several degrees, according to the means of instruction which they do enjoy, the capacity they have to receive it, and the diligence they use to that purpose. But a competent measure of the knowledge of the fundamental and most material principles or doctrines of the gospel is required unto all that may thence be said to be illuminated; that is, freed from the darkness and ignorance they once lived in, 2Pe 1:19-21.

This is the first property whereby the persons intended are described; they are such as were “illuminated” by the instruction they had received in the doctrine of the gospel, and the impression made thereby on their minds by the Holy Ghost; for this is a common work of his, and is here so reckoned. And the apostle would have us know that, —

**Obs. 1.** It is a great mercy, a great privilege, to be enlightened with the doctrine of the gospel, by the effectual working of the Holy Ghost. But, —

**Obs. 2.** It is such a privilege as may be lost, and end in the aggravation of the sin, and condemnation of those who were made partakers of it. And, —

**Obs. 3.** Where there is a total neglect of the due improvement of this privilege and mercy, the condition of such persons is hazardous, as inclining towards apostasy.

Thus much lies open and manifest in the text. But that we may more particularly discover the nature of this first part of the character of apostates, for their sakes who may look after their own concernment therein, we may yet a little more distinctly express the nature of that illumination and knowledge which is ascribed unto them; and how it is lost in apostasy will afterwards appear. And, —

**(1.)** There is a **knowledge of spiritual things that is purely *natural and disciplinary,* attainable and attained without any especial aid or assistance of the Holy Ghost.** As this is evident in common experience, so especially among such as, casting themselves on the study of spiritual things, are yet utter strangers unto all spiritual gifts. Some knowledge of the Scripture, and the things contained in it, is attainable at the same rate of pains and study with that of any other art or science.

**(2.)** The illumination intended, being a gift of the Holy Ghost, differs from, and is exalted above this knowledge that is purely *natural;* for it makes nearer approaches unto the light of spiritual things in their own nature than the other doth. Notwithstanding the utmost improvement of scientifical notions that are purely rural, the things of the gospel, in their own nature, are not only unsuited to the wills and affections of persons endued with them, but are really foolishness unto their minds. And as unto that goodness and excellency which give desirableness unto spiritual things, this knowledge discovers so little of them, that most men hate the things which they profess to believe. But this spiritual illumination gives the mind some satisfaction, with delight and joy, in the things that are known. By that beam whereby it shines into darkness, although it be not fully comprehended, yet it represents the way of the gospel as a way of righteousness, 2Pe 2:21, which reflects peculiar regard of it on the mind.

Moreover, the **knowledge that is merely natural hath little or no power upon the soul, either to keep it from sin or to constrain it unto obedience.** There is not a more secure and profligate generation of sinners in the world than those who are under the sole conduct of it. But **the illumination here intended is attended with efficacy, and doth effectually press in the conscience and whole soul unto an abstinence from sin, and the performance of all known duties.** Hence persons under the power of it and its convictions do ofttimes walk blamelessly and uprightly in the world, so as not with the other to contribute unto the contempt of Christianity. Besides, there is such an alliance between spiritual gifts, that where any one of them doth reside, it hath assuredly others accompanying of it, or one way or other belonging unto its train, as is manifest in this place. Even a single talent is made up of many pounds. But the light and knowledge which is of a mere natural acquirement is solitary, destitute of the society and countenance of any spiritual gift whatever. And these things are exemplified unto common observation every day.

**(3.)** There is a saving, sanctifying light and knowledge, which this spiritual illumination riseth not up unto; for though it transiently affects the mind with some glances of the beauty, glory, and excellency of spiritual things, yet it cloth not give that direct, steady, intuitive insight into them which is obtained by grace. See 2Co 3:18; 2Co 4:4; 2Co 4:6. Neither doth it renew, change, or transform the soul into a conformity unto the things known, by planting of them in the will and affections, as a gracious saving light doth, 2Co 3:18; Rom 6:17; Rom 12:2.

These things I judged necessary to be added, to clear the nature of the first character of apostates.

#### tasted of the heavenly gift

**2.** The *second* thing asserted in the description of them is, that they have “tasted of the heavenly gift,” — γευσαμένους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου*.* The doubling of the article. gives emphasis to the expression. And we must quire,

**(1.)** What is meant by the “heavenly gift;” and,

**(2.)** What. by “tasting of it.”

**(1.)** The “gift of God,” δωρεά, is either δόσις, “donatio,” or δώρημα, “donum.” Sometimes it is taken for the grant or giving itself, and sometimes for the thing given. In the first sense it is used, 2Co 9:15, Thanks be to God, ἐπὶ τῇ ἀνεκδιηγήτῳ αὐτοῦ δωρεᾷ,” — “for his gift that cannot be declared;” that is, fully or sufficiently. Now this gift was his grant of a free, charitable, and bountiful spirit to the Corinthians, in ministering unto the poor saints. The grant hereof is called God’s gift. So is the gift of Christ used also, Eph 4:7, “According to the measure of the gift of Christ;” that is, according as he is pleased to give and grant of the fruits of the Spirit unto men. See Rom 5:15-17; Eph 2:7. Sometimes it is taken for the thing given, properly δῶρον or δώρημα, as Jas 1:17. So is used, Joh 4:10, “If thou knewest the gift of God, τὴν δωρεάν τοῦ Θεοῦ:” — “the gift of God;” that is, the thing given by him, or to be given by him. It is, as **many judge, the person of Christ himself** in that place which is intended. But **the context makes plain that it is the Holy Ghost**; for he is the “living water” which the Lord Jesus promiseth in that place to bestow. And so far as I can observe, δωρεά, “the gift,” with respect unto God, as denoting the thing given, is nowhere used but only to signify the Holy Ghost. And if it be so, the sense of this place is determined, Act 2:38, “Ye shall receive,” τὴν δωρεὰν τοῦ ἀγίου Πνεὺματος— “the gift of the Holy Ghost;” not that which he gives, but that which he is. Act 8:20, “Thou hast thought δωρεὰν τοῦ Θεοῦ,” — “that the gift of God may be purchased with money;” that is, the power of the Holy Ghost in miraculous operations. So expressly, Act 10:45; Act 11:17. Elsewhere δωρεά, so far as I can observe, when respecting God, doth not signify the thing given, but the grant itself. The Holy Spirit is signally “the gift of God” under the new testament.

And he is said to be ἐπουράνιος*,* “heavenly,” or from heaven. This may have respect unto his work and effect, — they are heavenly as opposed to carnal and earthly. But principally it regards his mission by Christ after his ascension into heaven, Act 2:33. Being exalted, and having received the promise of the Father, he sent the Spirit. The promise of him was, that he should be sent “from heaven,” or “from above;” as God is saint to be “above,” which is the same with “heavenly,” Deu 4:39; 2Ch 6:23; Job 31:28; Isa 32:15; Isa 24:18. When he came upon the Lord Christ, to anoint him for his work, “the heavens were opened,” and he came from above, Mat 2:16. So, Act 2:2, at his first coming on the apostles, “there came a sound from heaven.” Hence he is said to be ἀποσταλεὶς οὐρανοῦ, — that is, to be ἡ δωρεὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐπουράνιος, “sent from heaven,” 1Pe 1:12. Wherefore, although he may be said to be heavenly upon other accounts also, which therefore are not absolutely to be excluded, yet his being sent from heaven by Christ, after his ascension thither, and exaltation there, is principally here regarded. He, therefore, is this ἡ δωρεὰ ἡ ἐπουράνιος*,* the “heavenly gift” here intended, though not absolutely, but with respect to an especial work.

That which riseth up against this interpretation is, that the Holy Ghost is expressly mentioned in the next clause, “And were made partakers of the Holy Ghost.” It is not therefore probable that he should be here also intended.

*Ans.* **[1.]** It is ordinary to have the same thing twice expressed in various words, to quicken the sense of them; and it is necessary it should be so when there are divers respects unto the same thing, as there are in this place.

**[2.]** The following clause may be exegetical of this, declaring more fully and plainly what is here intended, which is usual also in the Scriptures; so that nothing is cogent from this consideration to disprove an interpretation so suited to the sense of the place, and which the constant use of the word makes necessary to be embraced. But, —

**[3.]** The Holy Ghost is here mentioned as the great ***gift of the gospel times,* as coming down from heaven, not absolutely, not as unto his person, but with respect unto an especial work, namely, the change of the whole state of religious worship in the church of God**; whereas we shall see in the next words he is spoken of only with respect unto external, actual operations. But he was the great, the promised heavenly gift, to be bestowed under the new testament, by whom God would institute and ordain a new way, and new rites of worship, upon the revelation of himself and will in Christ. Unto him was committed the reformation of all things in the church, whose time was now come, Heb 9:10. The Lord Christ, when he ascended into heaven, left all things standing and continuing in religious worship as they had done from the days of Moses, though he had virtually put an end unto it [the Mosaical dispensation.] And he commanded his disciples that they should attempt no alteration therein until the Holy Ghost were sent from heaven to enable them thereunto, Act 1:4-5. But when he came, as the great gift of God promised under the new testament, he removes all the carnal worship and ordinances of Moses, and that by the full revelation of the accomplishment of all that was signified by them, and appoints the new, holy, spiritual worship of the gospel, that was to succeed in their room. **The Spirit of God, therefore, as bestowed for the introduction of the new gospel-state, in truth and worship, is “the heavenly gift” here intended.** Thus our apostle warneth these Hebrews that they

“turn not away from him who speaketh from heaven,” Heb 12:25; that is, Jesus Christ speaking in the dispensation of the gospel by “the Holy Ghost sent from heaven.” And there is an antithesis included herein between the law and the gospel; the former being given on earth, the latter being immediately from heaven. God in the giving of the law made use of the ministry of angels, and that on the earth; but he gave the gospel church- state by that Spirit which, although he worketh in men on the earth, and is said in every act or work to be *sent from* heaven, yet is still *in* heaven, and always speaketh from thence, as our Savior said of himself, with respect unto his divine nature, Joh 3:13.

**(2.)** We may inquire what it is to “taste” of this heavenly gift. The expression of tasting is metaphorical, and **signifies no more but to make a trial or experiment**; for so we do by tasting, naturally and properly, of that which is tendered unto us to eat. We taste such things by the sense given us naturally to discern our food; and then either receive or refuse them, as we find occasion. **It doth not, therefore, include eating, much less digestion and turning into nourishment of what is so tasted; for its nature being only thereby discerned, it may be refused**, yea, though we like its relish and savor, upon some other consideration. Some have observed, that to taste is as much as to eat; as 2Sa 3:35, “I will not taste bread, or ought else.” But the meaning is, ‘I will not so much as taste it;’whence it was impossible he should eat it. And when Jonathan says he only tasted a little of the honey, 1Sa 14:29, it was an excuse and extenuation of what he had done. But it is unquestionably used for some kind of experience of the nature of things: Pro 31:18, “She tasteth that her merchandise is good;” or hath experience of it, from its increase. Psa 34:8, “O taste and see that the LORD is good:” which Peter respects, 1Pe 2:3, “If so be that ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious,” or found it so by experience. It is therefore properly to make an experiment or trial of any thing, whether it be received or refused; and is sometimes opposed to eating and digestion, as Mat 27:34. That, therefore, which is ascribed unto these persons, is, that they had an experience of the power of the Holy Ghost, that gift of God, in the dispensation of the gospel, the revelation of the truth, and institution of the spiritual worship of it; of this state, and of the excellency of it, they had made some trial, and had some experience; — a privilege which all men were not made partakers of. And by this taste they were convinced that it was far more excellent than what they had been before accustomed unto; although now they had a mind to leave the finest wheat for their old acorns. Wherefore, although *tasting* contains a diminution in it, if compared with that *spiritual eating and drinking,* with that digestion of gospel truths, turning them into nourishment, which are in true believers; yet, absolutely considered, it denotes that apprehension and experience of the excellency of the gospel as administered by the Spirit, which is a great privilege and spiritual advantage, the contempt whereof will prove an unspeakable aggravation of the sin, and the remediless ruin of apostates.

The meaning, then, of this character given concerning these apostates is, that they had some experience of the power and efficacy of the Holy Spirit from heaven, in gospel administrations and worship. For what some say of faith, it hath here no place; and what others affirm of Christ, and his being the gift of God, comes in the issue unto what we have proposed. And we may observe, further to clear the design of the apostle in this commination, that, —

**Obs. 1. All the gifts of God under the gospel are peculiarly heavenly**, Joh 3:12, Eph 1:3; and that in opposition, —

**(1.)** To *earthly things,* Col 3:1-2;

**(2.)** To *carnal ordinances,* Heb 9:23. Let them beware by whom they are despised.

**Obs. 2. The Holy Ghost, for the revelation of the mysteries of the gospel, and the institution of the ordinances of spiritual worship, is the great “gift of God” under the new testament**.

**Obs. 3.** There is a goodness and excellency in this heavenly gift, which may be tasted or experienced in some measure by such as never receive them, in their life, power, and efficacy. They may taste, —

**(1.)** Of the word in its *truth,* not its po*wer;*

**(2.)** Of the worship of the church in its *outward order,* not its *inward beauty;*

**(3.)** Of the *gifts* of the church, not its *graces.*

**Obs. 4.** A rejection of the gospel, its truth and worship, after some experience had of their worth and excellency, is a high aggravation of sin, and a certain presage of destruction.

#### And were made partakers of the Holy Ghost

**3.** The *third* property whereby these persons are described is added in these words, Καὶ μετόχους γενηθέντας Πνεύματος ἀγίου, — “And were made partakers of the Holy Ghost.” This is placed in the middle or center of the privileges enumerated, two preceding it, and two following after, as that which is the root and animating principle of them all. They all are effects of the Holy Ghost, in his gifts or his graces, and so do depend on the participation of him. Now men do so partake of the Holy Ghost as they do receive him. And he may be received either as unto *personal inhabitation* or as unto *spiritual operations.* In the first way “the world cannot receive him,” Joh 14:17; where “the world” is opposed unto true believers, and therefore those here intended were not in that sense partakers of him. His operations respect his gifts. So to partake of him is to have a share, part, or portion, in what he distributes by way of spiritual gifts; in answer unto that expression,

“All these worketh that one and the self-same Spirit, dividing unto every man severally as he will,” 1Co 12:11.

So Peter told Simon the magician, that **he had no part in spiritual gifts, he was not partaker of the Holy Ghost**, Act 8:21. Wherefore to be “**partaker of the Holy Ghost,” is to have a share in and benefit of his spiritual operations.**

But whereas the other things mentioned are also gifts or operations of the Holy Ghost, on what ground or for what reason is this mentioned here in particular, that they were made partakers of him, which if his operations only be intended, seems to be expressed in the other instances?

*Ans.* **(1.)** It is, as we observed before, no unusual thing in the Scripture to express the same thing under various notions, the more effectually to impress a consideration and sense of it on our mind, especially where an expression hath a singular emphasis in it, as this hath here used; for it is an exceeding aggravation of the sins of those apostates, that in these things they were partakers of the Holy Ghost.

**(2.)** As was before intimated, also, this participation of the Holy Ghost is placed, it may be, in the **midst of the several parts of this description, as that whereon they do all depend,** and they are all but instances of it. They were “partakers of the Holy Ghost,” in that they were “once enlightened;*”* and so of the rest.

**(3.)** It expresseth their own personal interest in these things. They had an interest in the things mentioned not only objectively, as they were proposed and presented to them in the church, but subjectively, — they themselves in their own persons were made partakers of them. It is one thing for a man to have a share in and benefit by the gifts of the church, another to be personally himself endowed with them.

**(4.)** To mind them in an especial manner of the privileges they enjoyed under the gospel, above what they had in their Judaism; for whereas then they had not so much as heard that there was a Holy Ghost, — that is, a blessed dispensation of him in spiritual gifts, Act 19:2, — now they themselves in their own persons were made partakers of him; than which there could be no greater aggravation of their apostasy. And we may observe in our way, that, —

**Obs***.* The Holy Ghost is present with many as unto powerful operations, with whom he is not present as to gracious inhabitation; or, many are made partakers of him in his spiritual gifts who are never made partakers of him in his saving graces, Mat 7:22-23.

#### Tasted the good word of God

**4.** It is added, fourthly, in the description, that they had “tasted καλὸν Θεοῦ ῥῆμα, — the good word of God.” And we must inquire, —

**(1.)** What is meant by “the word of God;”

**(2.)** How it is said to be “good;*”* and,

**(3.)** In what sense they “tasted” of it.

**(1.)** ῾Ρῆμα is properly “verbum dictum,” “a word spoken;” and although it be sometimes used in another sense by our apostle, and by him alone, — Heb 1:3; Heb 11:3, where it denotes the effectual active power of God, — yet both the signification of the word and its principal use elsewhere denote words spoken; and when applied unto God, his word as preached and declared. See Rom 10:17, Joh 6:68. The word of God, that is the word of the gospel as preached, is that which they thus tasted of. But it may be said, that they **enjoyed the word of God in their state of Judaism. They did so, as to the written word; for “unto them were committed the oracles of God,”** Rom 3:2; but it is the word of God as preached in the dispensation of the gospel that is eminently thus called, and concerning which such excellent things are spoken, Rom 1:16; Act 20:32; Jas 1:21.

**(2.)** The word is said to be καλόν, “good,” desirable, amiable, as the word here used signifieth. Wherein it is so we shall see immediately. But whereas the word of God preached under the dispensation of the gospel may be considered two ways: —

**[1.]** In general, as to *the whole system of truths* contained therein; and

**[2.]** In especial, for **the *declaration made of the accomplishment of the promise* in sending Jesus Christ for the redemption of the church**, — it is here especially intended in this latter sense. This is emphatically called ῥῆμα, 1Pe 1:25. So the promise of God in particular is called his “good word:” Jer 29:10,

“After seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you;”

as he calls it “the good thing which he had promised,” Jer 33:14. The gospel is the “good tidings of peace and salvation” by Jesus Christ, Isa 52:7.

**(3.)** Hereof they are said to “taste,” as they were before of the heavenly gift. The apostle as it were studiously keeps himself to this expression, on purpose to manifest that **he intendeth not those who by faith do really receive, feed, and live on Jesus Christ, as tendered in the word of the gospel,** Joh 6:35; Joh 6:49-51; Joh 6:54-56. It is as if he had said, ‘I speak not of those who have received and digested the spiritual food of their souls, and turned it into spiritual nourishment; but of such as have so far tasted of it, as that they ought to have desired it as “sincere milk, to have grown thereby.”’But they had received such an experiment of its divine truth and power, as that it had various effects upon them. And for the further explication of these words, and therein of the description of the state of these supposed apostates, we may consider the ensuing observations, which declare the sense of the words, or what is contained in them: —

**Obs. 1.** There is a goodness and excellency in the word of God, able to attract and affect the minds of men, who yet never arrive at sincere obedience unto it.

**Obs. 2.** There is an **especial goodness in the word of the promise concerning Jesus Christ, and the declaration of its accomplishment.** [5]

[5] See four additional pages on the preceding topic, works, vol. 7:28-32.

#### And the powers of the world to come

**5.** *Lastly,* It is added, Δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος, — “And the powers of the world to come.” Δυνάμεις are גְּבוּרוֹת, or נִפְלָאוֹת; the **mighty, great, miraculous operations and works of the Holy Ghost.** What they were, and how they were wrought among these Hebrews, hath been declared in our exposition on Heb 2:4, whither I shall refer the reader; and they are known from the Acts of the Apostles, where sundry instances of them are recorded. I have also proved on that chapter, that by **“the world to come,” our apostle in this epistle intends the days of the Messiah, that being the usual name of it in the church at that time, as the new world which God had promised to create.** Wherefore these “powers of the world to come,” were the gifts whereby those signs, wonders, and mighty works, were then wrought by the Holy Ghost, according as it was foretold by the prophets that they should be so. See Joel 2, compared with Acts 2. These the persons spoken of are supposed to have “tasted;” for the particle τε refers to γευσαμένους foregoing. Either they had been wrought in and by themselves, or by others in their sight, whereby they had an experience of the glorious and powerful working of the Holy Ghost in the confirmation of the gospel. Yea, I do judge that **themselves in their own persons were partakers of these powers, in the gifts of tongues and other miraculous operations**; which was the highest aggravation possible of their apostasy, and that which peculiarly rendered their recovery impossible. For there is not in the Scripture an impossibility put upon the recovery of any but such as peculiarly sin against the Holy Ghost: and although that guilt may be otherwise contracted, yet in none so signally as this, of rejecting that truth which was confirmed by his mighty operations in them that rejected it; which could not be done without an ascription of his divine power unto the devil. Yet would I not fix on those extraordinary gifts exclusively unto those that are ordinary. They also are of the powers of the world to come. So is every thing that belongs to the erection or preservation of the new world or the kingdom of Christ. To the first setting up of a kingdom, great and mighty power is required; but being set up, the ordinary dispensation of power will preserve it. So is it in this matter. The extraordinary, miraculous gifts of the Spirit were used in the erection of Christ’s kingdom, but it is continued by **ordinary gifts; which, therefore, also belong unto the powers of the world to come.**

#### Considering the Description

**THIRDLY**, From the consideration of this description, in all the parts of it, we may understand what sort of persons it is that is intended here by the apostle. And it appears, yea is evident, —

**1.** That the persons here intended are **not *true and sincere believers****,* in the strict and proper sense of that name, at least they are not described here as such; so that from hence nothing can be concluded concerning them that are so, as to the possibility of their total and final apostasy. For,

**(1.)** There is in their full and largo description **no mention of faith, or believing, either expressly or in terms equivalent**; and in no other place in the Scripture are such intended, but they are mentioned by what belongs essentially to their state. And,

**(2.)** There is not any thing ascribed to these persons that is peculiar to them as such, or discriminative of them, as taken either from their especial relation unto God in Christ, or any such property of their own as is not communicable unto others. For instance, **they are not said to be called according to God’s purpose; to be born again, not of man, nor of the will of flesh, but of God; nor to be justified, or sanctified, or united unto Christ, or to be the sons of God by adoption; nor have they any other characteristical note of true believers ascribed to them.**

**(3.)** They are in the following verses **compared to the ground on which the rain often falls, and beareth nothing but thorns and briers.** But this is not so with true believers. For faith itself is an herb peculiar to the enclosed garden of Christ, and meet for him by whom we are dressed.

**(4.)** The apostle afterwards discoursing of *true believers,* doth in many particulars distinguish them from such as may be apostates; which is supposed of the persons here intended, as was before declared. For,

**[1.] He ascribeth unto them in general “better things**, and such as accompany salvation,” verse 9.

**[2.] He ascribes a “work and labor of love,”** as it is true faith alone which worketh by love, verse 10; whereof he speaks not one word concerning these.

**[3.] He asserts their preservation**; —

**1*st****,* **On the account of the *righteousness and faithfulness* of God**, verse 10;

**2*dly****,* **Of the immutability of his counsel concerning them**, verse 17, 18. In all these and sundry other instances doth he put a difference between these apostates and true believers. And whereas the apostle intends to declare the aggravation of their sin in falling away by the principal privileges whereof they were made partakers, here is not one word, in name or thing, of those which he expressly assigns to be the chief privileges of true believers, Rom 8:27-30.

#### More particularly whom he doth intend

**2.** Our next inquiry is more particularly whom he doth intend. And,

**(1.)** They were such who not long before were converted from Judaism unto Christianity, upon the evidence of the truth of its doctrine, and the miraculous operations wherewith its dispensation was accompanied.

**(2.)** He intends not the *common sort* of them, but such as had obtained *especial privileges* among them. For they had received extraordinary gifts of the Holy Ghost, as speaking with tongues or working miracles. And,

**(3.)** They had found in themselves and others convincing evidences that the kingdom of God and the Messiah, which they called “the world to come,” was come unto them; and had satisfaction in the glories of it.

**(4.)** Such persons as these, as they have a work of light on their minds, so, according to the efficacy of their convictions, they may have such a change wrought upon their affections and in their conversation, as that they may be of great esteem among professors; and such those here intended might be. Now it must needs be some horrible frame of spirit, some malicious enmity against the truth and holiness of Christ and the gospel, some violent love of sin and the world, that could turn off such persons as these from the faith, and blot out all that light and conviction of truth which they had received. **But the least grace is a better security for heaven than the greatest gifts and privileges whatever.**

These are the persons concerning whom our apostle discourseth, and of whom it is supposed by him that they may “fall away,” — καὶ παραπεσόντας*.* The especial nature of the sin here intended is afterwards declared in two instances or aggravating circumstances. This word expresseth the respect it had to the state and condition of the sinners themselves; *they fall away,* do that whereby they do so. I think we have well expressed the word, “If they shall fall away.” Our old translations render it only, “If they shall fall:” which expressed not the sense of the word, and was liable to a sense not at all intended; for he doth not say, “If they shall fall into sin,” — this, or that, or any sin whatever that can be named, suppose the greatest sin imaginable, namely, the denial of Christ in the time of danger or persecution. This was that sin (as we intimated before) about which so many contests were raised of old, and so many canons were multiplied about the ordering of them who had contracted the guilt thereof. But one example well considered had been a better guide for them than all their own arbitrary rules and imaginations, — when Peter fell into this sin, and yet was “renewed again to repentance,” and that speedily. Wherefore we may lay down this in the first place, as to the sense of the words: **There is no particular sin that any man may fall into occasionally, through the power of temptation, that can cast the sinner under this commination, so that it should be impossible to renew him to repentance.** It must, therefore, secondly, be a course of sin or sinning that is intended. But there are various degrees herein also, yea, there are divers kinds of such courses in sin. A man may so fall into a way of sin as still to retain in his mind such a principle of light and conviction that may be suitable to his recovery. To exclude such from all hopes of repentance is expressly contrary to Eze 18:21, Isa 55:7, yea, and the whole sense of the Scripture. Wherefore men, after some conviction and reformation of life, may fall into corrupt and wicked courses, and make a long abode or continuance in them. Examples hereof we have every day amongst us, although it may be none to parallel that of Manasseh. Consider the nature of his education under his father Hezekiah, the greatness of his sins, the length of his continuance in them, with his following recovery, and he is a great instance in this case. Whilst there is in such persons any seed of light or conviction of truth which is capable of an excitation or revival, so as to put forth its power and efficacy in their souls, they cannot be looked on to be in the condition intended, though their case be dangerous.

**3.** Our apostle makes a distinction between πταίω and πίπτω, Rom 11:11, — between “stumbling” and “falling;” and would not allow that the unbelieving Jews of those days were come so far as πίπτειν, — that is, to fall absolutely: Λέγω ου῏ν· Μὴ ἔπταισαν ἵνα πέσωσι; μὴ γένοιτο,*—* “I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid;” that is, absolutely and irrecoverably. So, therefore, doth that word signify in this place. And παραπίπτω increaseth the signification, either as to perverseness in the manner of the fall, or as to violence in the fall itself.

#### What Falling Away It Is That The Apostle Here Intendeth

From what hath been discoursed, it will appear what falling away it is that the apostle here intendeth. And, —

**(1.)** It is not a falling into this or that *actual sin,* be it of what nature it will; which may be, and yet not be a falling away.

**(2.)** It is not a falling upon *temptation or surprisal;* for concerning such fallings we have rules of another kind given us in sundry places, and those exemplified in especial instances: but it is that which is premeditated, of deliberation and choice.

**(3.)** It is not a falling by a relinquishment or renunciation some, though very material *principles* of Christian religion, by error or seduction; as the Corinthians fell, in denying the resurrection of the dead; and the Galatians, by denying justification by faith in Christ alone. Wherefore, —

**(4.)** It must consist in a ***total renunciation* of all the constituent principles and doctrines of Christianity**, whence it is denominated. Such was the sin of them who relinquished the gospel to return unto Judaism, as it was then stated, in opposition unto it, and hatred of it. This it was, and not any kind of actual sins, that the apostle manifestly discourseth concerning.

**(5.)** For the completing of this falling away according to the intention of the apostle, it is required that this **renunciation be *avowed* and professed**; as when a man forsaketh the profession of the gospel and falls into Judaism, or Mohammedanism, or Gentilism, in persuasion and practice. For the apostle discourseth concerning faith and obedience as professed; and so, therefore, also of their contraries And this avowment of a relinquishment of the gospel hath many provoking aggravations attending it. And yet whereas some men may in their hearts and minds utterly renounce the gospel, but, upon some outward, secular considerations, either dare not or will not profess that inward renunciation, their falling away is complete and total in the sight of God; and all they do to cover their apostasy in an external compliance with Christian religion, is in the sight of God but a mocking of him, and the highest aggravation of their sin.

This is the falling away intended by the apostle: — **a voluntary, resolved relinquishment of and apostasy from the gospel, the faith, rule, and obedience thereof**; which cannot be without casting the highest reproach and contumely imaginable upon the person of Christ himself, as is afterwards expressed.

#### Concerning these persons, and their thus falling away, two things are to be considered in the text

**FOURTHLY**, Concerning these persons, and their thus falling away, two things are to be considered in the text:

**1.** *What is affirmed of them.*

**2.** *The reason of that affirmation.*

**1.** The first is, That “it is impossible to renew them again to repentance.” The thing intended is negative; — to “renew them again to repentance,” this is denied of them. But the modification of that negation turns the proposition into an affirmation: “It is impossible so to do.” ᾿Αδύνατον γάρ*.* The importance of this word is dubious; some think an *absolute,* and others a *moral* impossibility is intended thereby. This latter most fix upon; so that it is a matter rare, difficulty, and seldom to be expected, that is intended, and not that which is absolutely impossible. Considerable reasons and instances are produced for either interpretation. But we must look further into the meaning of it.

All future events depend on God, who alone doth necessarily exist. Other things may be, or may not be, as they respect him or his will. And so things that are future may be said to be impossible, or be so, either with respect unto the nature of God, or his decrees, or his moral rule, order, and law.

**(1.)** Things are impossible with respect unto *the nature of God,* either absolutely, as being consistent with his being and essential properties: so it is impossible that God should lie: or, on some supposition, so it is impossible that God should forgive sin without satisfaction, on the supposition of his law and the sanction of it. In this sense the repentance of these apostates, it may be, is not impossible. I say, it may be; it may be there is nothing in it contrary to any essential properties of the nature of God, either directly or reductively. But I will not be positive herein. For the things ascribed unto these apostates are such, — namely, their “crucifying the Son of God afresh, and putting him to open shame,” — as that I know not but that it may be contrary to the holiness, and righteousness, and glory of God, as the supreme ruler of the world, to have any more mercy on them than on the devils themselves, or those that are in hell. But I will not assert this to be the meaning of the place.

**(2.)** Again; things possible in themselves, and with respect unto the nature of God, are rendered impossible by *God’s decree and purpose:* he hath absolutely determined that they shall never be. So it was impossible that Saul and his posterity should be preserved in the kingdom of Israel. It was not contrary to the nature of God, but God had decreed that so it should not be, 1Sa 15:28-29. But, the decrees of God respecting persons in particular, and not qualifications in the first place, they cannot be here intended; because they are free acts of his will, not revealed, neither in particular nor by virtue of any general rule, as they are sovereign, making differences between persons in the same condition, Rom 9:11-12. What is possible or impossible with respect unto the nature of God, we may know in some good measure from the certain knowledge we may have of his being and essential properties; but what is so one way or other with respect unto his decrees or purposes, which are sovereign, free acts of his will, knoweth no man, no, not the angels in heaven, Isa 40:13-14; Rom 11:34.

**(3.)** Things are possible or impossible with respect unto the *rule* and *order* of all things that God hath appointed. When in things of duty God hath neither expressly commanded them, nor appointed means for the performance of them, then are we to look upon them as impossible; and then, with respect unto us, they are so absolutely, and so to be esteemed. And **this is the impossibility here principally intended. It is a thing that God hath neither commanded us to endeavor, nor appointed means to attain it, nor promised to assist us in it.** It is therefore that which we have no reason to look after, attempt, or expect, as being not possible by any law, rule, or constitution of God.

The apostle instructs us no further in the nature of future events but as our own duty is concerned in them. It is not for us either to look, or hope, or pray for, or endeavor the renewal of such persons unto repentance. God gives law unto us in these things, not unto himself. It may be possible with God, for aught we know, if there be not a contradiction in it unto any of the holy properties of his nature; only he will not have us to expect any such thing from him, nor hath he appointed any means for us to endeavor it. What he shall do we ought thankfully to accept; but our own duty towards such persons is absolutely at an end. And, indeed, they put themselves wholly out of our reach.

That which is said to be thus impossible with respect unto these persons is, πάλιν ἀνακαινιζειν εἰς μετάνοιαν, “to renew them again to repentance,” Μετάνοια in the New Testament with respect unto God, signifies “a gracious change of mind,” on gospel principles and promises, leading the whole soul into conversion unto God. This is the beginning and entrance of our turning unto God, without which neither the will nor the affections will be engaged unto him, nor is it possible for sinners to find acceptance with him.

“It is impossible ἀνακαινίζειν,” “to renew.” The construction of the word is defective, and must be supplied. Σέ — ‘may be added, “to renew themselves,” — it is not possible they should do so; or τινάς, that some should, that any should renew them: and this I judge to be intended. For the impossibility mentioned respects the duty and endeavors of others. In vain shall any attempt their recovery by the use of any means whatever. And we must inquire what it is to be *renewed,* and what it is to be renewed *again.*

Now our ἀνακαινισμός is the renovation of the image of God in our natures, whereby we are dedicated again unto him. For as we had lost the image of God by sin, and were separated from him by things profane, this ἀνακαινισμός respects both the **restoration of our nature and the dedication of our persons to God.** And it is twofold: —

**(1.)** *Real* and *internal,* in regeneration and effectual sanctification, “The washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Ghost:” Tit 2:5; 1Th 5:23. But this is not that which is here intended. For this these apostates never had, and so cannot be said to be “renewed again” unto it; for **no man can be renewed again unto that which he never had.**

**(2.)** It is *outward in the profession* and pledge of it. Wherefore renovation in this sense consists in the solemn confession of faith and repentance by Jesus Christ, with the seal of baptism received thereon; for thus it was with all those who were converted unto the gospel. Upon their profession of repentance towards God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, they received the baptismal pledge of an inward renovation, though really they were not partakers thereof. But this estate was their ἀνακαινισμός, their “renovation.” From this state they fell totally, renouncing Him who is the author of it, his grace which is the cause of it, and the ordinance which is the pledge thereof.

Hence it appears what it is πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν, **“to renew them again.” It is to bring them again into this state of profession by a second renovation, and a second baptism as a pledge thereof.** This is determined to be impossible, and so unwarrantable for any to attempt. And for the most part such persons do openly fall into such blasphemies against, and engage (if they have power) into such persecution of the truth, as that they give themselves sufficient direction how others should behave themselves towards them. So the ancient church was satisfied in the case of Julian. This is the sum concerning what is affirmed of these apostates, namely, that “it is impossible to renew them unto repentance;” that is, so to act towards them as to bring them to that repentance whereby they may be instated in their former condition. Hence sundry things may be observed for the clearing of the apostle’s design in this discourse; as, —

**(1.)** Here is nothing said concerning the acceptance or refuel of *any upon repentance* or the profession thereof after any sin, to be made by the church, whose judgment is to be determined by other rules and circumstances. And this perfectly excludes the pretense of the Novatians from any countenance in these words. For whereas they would have drawn their warranty from hence for the utter exclusion from church communion of all those who had denied the faith in times of persecution, although they expressed a repentance whose sincerity they could not evince. Those only are intended who neither do nor can come to repentance itself, nor make a profession of it; with whom the church had no more to do. It is not said, that men who ever thus fell away shall not, upon their repentance, be admitted into their former state in the church; but that such is the severity of God against them that he will not again give them repentance unto life.

**(2.)** Here is nothing that may be brought in bar against such as, having fallen into any *great sin,* or any course in sinning, and that after light, convictions, and gifts received and exercised, desire to repent of their sins, and endeavor after sincerity therein; yea, such a desire and endeavor exempt any one from the judgment here threatened.

There is therefore in it that which tends greatly to the encouragement of such sinners. For whereas it is here declared, concerning those who are thus rejected of God, that “it is impossible to *review them,”* or to do any thing towards that which shall have a tendency to repentance, those who are not satisfied that they do yet savingly repent, but only are sincerely exercised how they may attain thereunto, have no concernment in this commination, but evidently have the door of mercy still open unto them; for it is shut only against those who shall never endeavor to turn by repentance. And although persons so rejected of God may fall under convictions of their sin attended with despair, — which is unto them a foresight of their future condition, — yet as unto the least attempt after repentance on the terms of the gospel, they do never rise up unto it. Wherefore **the impossibility intended,** of what sort soever it be, **respects the severity of God**, not in refusing or rejecting the greatest sinners which seek after and would be renewed unto repentance, — which is contrary unto innumerable of his promises, — but **in the giving up such sinners as those are here mentioned unto that obdurateness and obstinacy in sinning, that blindness of mind and hardness of heart, as that they neither can nor shall ever sincerely seek after repentance; nor may any means, according to the mind of God, be used to bring them thereunto.** And the righteousness of the exercise of this severity is taken from the nature of this sin, or what is contained in it, which the apostle declares in the ensuing instances. [6]

[6] For additional ten pages on this topic, see works, vol. 7. pp. 40-51. — Ed.

### vv. 7-8

**Hebrews 6:7-8**

What the apostle had doctrinally instructed the Hebrews in before, in these verses he layeth before them under an apposite similitude. For his design herein is to **represent the condition of all sorts of persons who profess the gospel, and live under the dispensation of its truths, with the various events that do befall them.** He had before treated directly only of *unfruitful and apostatizing professors,* whom here he represents by unprofitable ground, and God’s dealing with them as men do with such ground when they have tilled it in vain. For the church is a vine or vineyard, and God is the husbandman, Joh 15:1; Isa 5:1-7. But here, moreover, for the greater illustration of what he affirms concerning such persons, he compriseth in his similitude the contrary state of *sound believers and fruitful professors,* with the acceptance they have with, and blessing they receive from God. And contraries thus compared do illustrate one another, as also the design of him who treateth concerning them. We need not, therefore, engage into a particular inquiry what it is which the word “for,” whereby these verses are annexed and continued unto the precedent, doth peculiarly and immediately respect, concerning which there is some difference among expositors. Some suppose it is the dealing of God with apostates, before laid down, which the apostle regards, and in these verses gives an account of the reason of it, or whence it is they come unto such a woful end. Others, observing that in his whole ensuing discourse he insists principally, if not only, on *the state of sound believers* and their acceptance with God, suppose he hath immediate respect unto what he had declared in the beginning of the chapter, verses 1-3, concerning his design to carry them on unto perfection. But there is no need that we should restrain his purpose to either of these intentions exclusively unto the other; yea, it is contrary to the plain scope of his discourse so to do. For **he compriseth *both sorts of professors,* and gives a lively representation of their condition, of God’s dealing with them, and the event thereof.** The reason, therefore, that he gives is not to be confined to either sort exclusively, but extends itself equally to the whole subject treated of.

**Heb 6:7-8.** — Γῆ γὰρ ἡ πιοῦσα τὸν ἐπ᾿ αὐτῆς πολλάκις ἐρχόμενον ὑετὸν, καὶ τίκτουσα βοτάνην εὔθετον ἐκείνοις δι᾿ οὕς καὶ γεωργεῖται μεταλαμβάνει εὐλογίας ἀπὸ τοῦ Θεοῦ· ἐκφέρουσα δὲ ἀκάνθας καὶ τριβόλους ἀδόκιμος καὶ κατάρας ἐγγὺς, ἧς τὸ τέλος εἰς καῦσιν.

There is not any firing materially to be observed concerning these words in any translations, ancient or modern. They all agree, unless one or two that openly depart from the text; and which, therefore, are of no consideration. Only δι᾿ οὕς is by the Syriac rendered דְּמֶטולָתְהוּן, “propter quos,” “for whom;” all others read “per quos,” or “a quibus, “ by whom;” only ours mark “for whom” in the margin, which indeed is the more usual signification of διά with an accusative case. But that is not infrequently put for the genitive. And although this be not usual in other authors, yet unquestionable instances of it may be given, and amongst them that of Demosthen. Olynth. 1 cap. 6 is eminent: Καὶ θεωρῖ τὸν τρόπον, δι᾿ ὅν μέγας γέγονεν ἀσθενὴς ὤν τοκαταρχὰς Φίλιππος, “And seeth the way whereby (by which) Philip, who at first was weak became so great.” But into the proper sense of this expression in this place we must inquire afterwards.

**Heb 6:7-8.** — For the earth, which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God. But that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned.

Some things must be observed concerning this similitude in general before we inquire into the particulars of it.

**1.** The ἀπίδοσις, or *application* of it, is left included in the πρότασις*,* or *proposition* of the similitude itself, and is not expressed. A description is given of the earth, by its culture, fruit, or barrenness; but nothing is especially added of the things signified hereby, although those are principally intended. And the way of reasoning herein, as it is compendious, so it is plain and instructive, because the analogy between the things produced in the similitude and the things signified is plain and evident, both in itself and from the whole discourse of the apostle.

**2.** There is a *common subject* of the whole similitude, branched out into distinct parts, with very different events ascribed unto them. We must therefore consider both what is that common subject, as also wherein the distinct parts whereinto it is branched do *agree on* the one hand and *differ* on the other.

**(1.)** The **common subject is “the earth,” of the nature whereof both branches are equally participant.** Originally and naturally they differ not, they are both the earth.

**(2.)** On this common subject, in both branches of it, the **rain equally falls; not upon one more and the other less, not upon one sooner and the other later.**

**(3.)** It is equally dressed, tilled, or manured, by or for the use of sortie; one part doth not lie neglected whilst the other is cared for.

In these things there is an agreement, and all is equal in both branches of the common subject. But hereon a partition is made, or a distribution of this common subject into two parts or sorts, with a double difference between them; and that,

**(1.)** On *their parts;*

**(2.)** Of *God’s dealing* with them. For,

**(1.)** The **one part brings forth “herbs;” which are described by their usefulness, they are “meet for them by whom it is dressed.”’**The other beareth **“thorns and briers,” — things not only of no use or advantage, but moreover noxious and hurtful.**

**(2.)** They differ in the consequent, on the part of God: for the first sort “receiveth blessing from God;*”* the other, in opposition unto this blessing from God (whence we may also learn what is contained therein), is first “rejected,” then “cursed,” then “burned.”

Before I proceed to the particular explication of the words, inquiry must be made into the especial design of the apostle in them with respect unto these Hebrews. For here is not only a threatening of what might come to pass, but a particular prediction of what would come to pass, and a declaration of what was already in part accomplished. For by the **“earth” he understands in an especial manner *the church and nation of the Jews.***This was God’s vineyard, Isa 5:7. Hereunto he sent all his ministers, and last of all his Son, Mat 21:35-37; Jer 2:21. And to them he calls, “O earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the LORD,” Jer 22:29. Upon this earth the rain often fell, in the ministerial dispensation of the word unto that church and people. With respect; hereunto Christ says unto them, ποσάκις, *“how often* would I have gathered thy children,” Mat 23:37; as here the rain is said to fall πολλάκις, *often* upon it. This was the earth wherein were the plants of God’s especial planting. And these were all now distributed into two parts. 1. Those who, believing and obeying the gospel, brought forth the fruits of repentance, faith, and new obedience. These being effectually wrought upon by the power of God in the new creation, our apostle compares to the earth in the old creation, when it was first made by God and blessed of him. Then, in the first place, it brought forth דֶּשֶׁא; that is, βότάνην, as the LXX. render the word, — “herb” meet for Him that made and blessed it, Gen 1:11. And these were still to be continued the vineyard of God, a field which he cared for. This was that gospel church gathered of the Hebrews, which brought forth fruit to the glory of God, and was blessed of him.

This was the remnant among them according to the election of grace, which obtained mercy when the rest were blinded, Rom 11:5; Rom 11:7.

**2.** For the remainder of this people, the residue of this earth, it was made up of two sorts, which are both of them here cast under the same lot and condition. There were ***obstinate unbelievers on* the one hand, who pertinaciously rejected Christ and the gospel**; with ***hypocritical apostates* on the other, who having for a season embraced its profession, fell off again unto their Judaism**. All these the apostle compares unto the earth when the covenant of God with the creation was broken by the sin of man, and it was put under the curse. Hereof it is said קוֹ׃ וְדַרְדַּר תַּצְמִיחַ, Gen 3:18; ἀκάνθας καὶ τριβόλους αυνατελεῖ, **as the LXX. renders it, — the very words here used by the apostle; it “beareth thorns and briers.”** Such was this church and people, now they had broken and rejected the covenant of God by their unbelief, — earth that brought forth thorns and briers. “The best of them was as a brier, and the most upright of them as a thorn hedge.” Then was the day of their prophets nigh, — the day of their visitation foretold by the prophets, their watchmen, Mic 7:4. So God threatened that when he rejected his vineyard it should bring forth briers and thorns, Isa 5:6.

And of these unbelieving and apostate Hebrews, or this barren earth, the apostle affirmeth three things: —

**1.** That it was ἀδόκιμος, “rejected,” or not approved; that is, of God. Hereof they had boasted, and herein they continued yet to pride themselves, that God owned them, that they were his people, and preferred above all others. But although God was pleased yet to exercise patience towards them, he had pronounced concerning them in general that they were not his people, that he owned them not. Thorns and briers were come upon their altars, so that both their persons and worship were rejected of God.

**2.** It was “nigh unto cursing.” And this curse, which it was now very nigh unto, had in it, —

**(1.)** Barrenness; and,

**(2.)** An unalterable and irrevocable destination unto destruction.

**(1.)** It had in it barrenness; for this church of the Jews, made up now of infidels and apostates, was represented by the fig-tree cursed by our Savior: Mat 21:19, “He said unto it, Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever. And presently the fig-tree withered away.” After this time, the gospel having been sufficiently tendered unto them, and rejected by them, there was no more of saving faith, repentance, or obedience, nothing that was acceptable unto God in holiness or worship, ever found amongst them to this day. *Many Jews* were after this converted, but the *church of the Jews* never bare any more fruits unto God. And,

**(2.)** They were devoted unto destruction. The close of the Old Testament, and therein of the immediate solemn revelation of God unto that church, was, that **if they received not the Lord Christ after the coming and ministry of Elijah, — that is, of John the Baptist, — God would “come and smite the earth with a curse,”** Mal 4:6. He would make it a thing anathematized, or sacredly devoted unto destruction, — מָחְרָם.

When God first brought them into his land, which was to be the seat of his ordinances and solemn worship, the first town that they came unto was Jericho. This, therefore, God anathematized, or devoted to perpetual destruction, with a curse upon him that should attempt its re-edification, Jos 6:17. The whole land thereby was alienated from its former possessors, and devoted unto another use, and the place itself utterly destroyed. Jerusalem, and consequently the whole church, was now to be made as Jericho; and the curse denounced was now speedily to be put in execution, wherein the land was to be alienated from their right unto it, and be devoted to desolation.

**3. The end of all this was, that this earth should be “burned.” A universal desolation, according to the prediction of our Savior**, by fire and sword, representing the eternal vengeance they were liable unto, was to come upon them. This was now approaching, namely, the end of their church and state, in the destruction of the city, temple, and nation.

This was the especial design of the apostle with respect unto these Hebrews; and he adds this scheme or delineation of the present and approaching condition of that apostatized church, to give terror unto the commination that he gave unto unprofitable professors. But whereas all things unto the very last happened unto them as types, and the condition of the churches of the gospel is represented in their sin and punishment; and whereas the things reflected on are such as it is the common and constant concernment of all professors heedfully to consider, I shall open the words in the whole latitude of their signification, as they are peculiarly instructive unto us.

**FIRST**, The subject of the proposition in the similitude, is the “earth;*”* and that which is represented thereby, is the hearts and minds of all those to whom the gospel is preached. So it is explained in that parable of our Savior wherein he expresseth the word of the gospel as preached by seed, and compares the hearers of it unto several sorts of ground whereinto that seed is cast. And the allusion is wonderfully apposite and instructive.

For, —

**1*.*** *Seed* is the principle of all things living, of all things that, having any kind of natural life, are capable of natural increase, growth, and fruit; and whatever they arrive unto, it is but the actuating of the vital seed from whence they do proceed. So is the word of the gospel unto all spiritual life, 1Pe 1:23. And believers, because of their growth, increase, and fruit, from this vital principle or seed of the word, are called “vines,” “plants of God’s planting,” and the like.

**2.** The earth is the only fit and proper subject for seed to be put into, and alone is capable of the culture or husbandry that is to be used about it. God hath made no other matter or subject to receive the seeds of things that may bring forth fruit; no man casts seed into the air or water. It was of the earth alone that God said, “Let it bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit-tree yielding fruit after its kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth,” Genesis 11, 12. The earth alone hath a passive power to be made fruitful; it hath that matter in it which, being cultivated, disposed, excited, sowed, planted, blessed, may bring forth fruit. So it is with the souls of men with respect unto the seed of the word. Their minds, and they alone, are a subject capable of receiving of it, and improving it. They are the only meet *object* of divine care and culture*.* The faculties of our souls, our minds, wills, and affections, are meet to entertain the gospel, and to bring forth the fruits of it; whereof nothing is found in any other creatures on the earth. Hence we are Θεοῦ γεώργιον, 1Co 2:9, “God’s husbandry,” the ground or field that he tilleth; as Christ mystical, comprising all professors, is the vine, and his Father is the husbandman, Joh 15:1, by whom it is dressed and pruned.

**3.** The earth by and of itself, in the state wherein it is, brings forth nothing that is good or useful. Upon its first creation it was inlaid and impregnated, by the blessing of God, with all seeds of useful herbs and fruits; but after the entrance of sin, its womb was cursed with barrenness as unto its first usefulness, and it brings forth nothing of itself but thorns, briers, and noxious weeds, — at least those in such abundance as to choke and corrupt all the remainders of useful seeds and plants in it. It is, like the field of the slothful, grown over with thorns, and nettles cover the face thereof. Especially it is condemned to utter barrenness if the rain fall not on it; whereof afterwards. And such are the hearts and minds of men by nature. They are dark, barren, unprofitable, and which, without divine culture, will bring forth no fruits of righteousness, that are acceptable unto God. All that of themselves they can bring forth are noxious weeds. Among the weeds of unmanured earth some are painted with alluring colors, but they are but weeds still; and among the fruits of unsanctified minds some may carry a more specious appearance than others, but they are all, spiritually considered, sins and vices still. So, then, the common subject of the similitude is plain and instructive. And we may in our passage observe, that, —

**Obs. 1.** The minds of all men by nature are universally and equally barren with respect unto fruits of righteousness and holiness, meet for and acceptable unto God.

They are all as the earth under the curse. There is a natural difference among men as unto their intellectual abilities. Some are of a far more piercing and sagacious understanding, and of a sounder judgment than others. Some have a natural temper and inclination disposing them unto gentleness, sobriety, and modesty, when others from their constitution are morose, passionate, and perverse. And hereon some make a good progress in morality and usefulness in the world, whilst others lie immersed in all vicious abominations. There are therefore, on these and the like accounts, great differences among men, wherein some are incomparably to be preferred above others. But as to the fruits of spiritual holiness and righteousness, all men by nature are equal and alike; for our nature, as unto a principle of living unto God, is equally corrupted in all. There are no more sparks or relics of grace in one than another. All spiritual differences between men are from the power and grace of God in the dispensation of the word. But we must proceed.

**SECONDLY**, Of this earth it is said, that it “drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it.” Something is wanting, something must be done to this barren earth to make it fruitful; and this is done by rain. And that is described by, —

**1.** Its *communication* or application unto the earth, — it falls upon it;

**2.** An especial *adjunct* thereof in its frequency: — it falls often on it;

**3.** By that *reception* which the earth is naturally fitted and suited to give unto it, — it drinketh it in.

The thing itself is *rain.* This is that whereby alone the earth, otherwise dry and barren, is impregnated and made fruitful. For, there is therein a communication of moisture, absolutely requisite to apply the nourishing virtue of the earth unto the radical principles of all fruits whatever; and therefore before any rain did fall God caused a vapor to arise, which supplied the use of it, and watered the earth, Gen 2:6. So the poetexpresseth it: —

***“Tum Pater omnipotens fecundis imbribus AEther,***

***Conjugis in greraium laetae descendit, et omnes***

***Magnus alit, magno commistus corpore, fetus.”*** ***— Georg, 2:325.***

And μ῾ετός is a “wetting shower;” not a storm, not a violence of rain causing an inundation, which tends to barrenness and sterility; nor such as is unseasonable and spoils the fruits of the earth; but a plentiful shower is intended: for ὑετός exceeds ὄμβρος, as Aristotle observes.

**1.** This rain *falls* on the ground. And,

**2.** It is said to fall *often* or frequently, “iteratis vicibus.” The land of Canaan is commended that it was not like the land of Egypt, where the seed was sowed, and watered with the foot, but that it was “a land of hills and valleys, and did drink water of the rain of heaven,” Deu 11:10-11. And they had commonly two seasons of it, the former whereof they called יוֹרֶה, Joreh, and the latter מלְקוֹשׁ, Malcosh, Deu 11:14. The former fell about October, in the beginning of their year, when their seed was cast into the ground, and the earth, as it were, taught thereby, as the word signifies, to apply itself unto the seed, and to become fruitful. The other fell about March, when their corn was grown up, filling the straw and ear for the harvest, as the word probably signifies. Hence it is said, that “Jordan overfloweth all his banks all the time of harvest,” Jos 2:15, 1Ch 12:15; which was occasioned by the falling of Malcosh, or this latter rain. And that this was in the first month, or March, which was the entrance of their harvest, is evident from hence, in that immediately after they had passed over Jordan, during the swelling of its waters, they kept the passover at Gilgal on the fourteenth of that first month, Jos 5:10. Whilst they had these rains in their proper seasons, the land was fruitful; and it was by withholding of them that God punished them with the barrenness of the earth, and famine thereon ensuing. Besides these, in good seasons, they had many other occasional showers; as mention is made of the “showers on the mown grass.” Hence it is here supposed that the rain falls πολλάκις, “often,” on this earth. Again, —

**3.** The earth is said *to drink in the rain.* The expression is metaphorical but common: ῾Η γῆ μέλαινα πίνει. And the allusion is taken from living creatures, who by drinking take in water into their inward parts and bowels. To do thus is peculiar unto the earth. If the rain falls upon rocks or stones, it runs off from them, it hath no admission into them; but into the earth it soaks more or less, according as the condition of the ground is more or less receptive of it. And it is the nature of the earth, as it were, to suck in these moistening rains that fall upon it, until it be even inebriated: Psa 65:9-10, “Thou visitest the earth, and waterest it, ...... Thou waterest the ridges thereof abundantly: thou settlest the furrows thereof; — תְּלָמֶיהָ רַוֵּה, “thou inebriatest (or “makest drunk”) “the furrows thereof.”

This is the πρότασις*,* or proposition of the similitude. The ἀπόδοσις is included in it; that is, the application of it unto the matter in hand. That by the “earth,” the minds and consciences of men are intended, was before declared; and it is as evident what is meant by the “rain.” Yet some suppose that the gifts of the Holy Ghost, before treated of, may be designed by the apostle; for in the communication of them the Holy Spirit is frequently said to be poured out; that is, as water or rain. But,

**1.** This rain is said to fall often on the earth (yea, upon that earth which continueth utterly barren), in one shower after another. And this can be no way accommodated unto the dispensation of the gifts of the Spirit; for they being once communicated, if they be not exercised and improved, God gives no more showers of them. It is therefore the administration of the word that is intended. And in other places the doctrine of the Scripture is frequently compared unto rain and watering: Deu 32:2,

“My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew; as the small rain upon the tender herb, and as the showers upon the grass.”

And where God denies his word unto any people, he says, “Upon them shall be no rain,” Zec 14:17. And hence נָטַף, “to drop” as the rain doth, is an expression for prophesying or preaching, Eze 21:2, Amo 7:16; the showers whereof are sometimes more soft and gentle, sometimes more earnest and pressing. And those words, יַעְטֶה מוֹרֶה גּםאּבְּרָכוֹת, Psa 84:7, because of the ambiguity of the words, and the proportion that is between the things, are rendered by some, “The rain also filleth the pools;” and by others, “The teachers shall be filled with blessings.”

This is that whereby God watereth and refresheth the barren souls of men, that whereby he communicates unto them all things that may enable them to be fruitful; in brief, not to enlarge on the allegory, the word of the gospel is every way unto the souls of men as the rain to the barren earth.

**2.** This rain is said to *fall often* on the earth. And this may be considered either with respect unto the especial concernment of these Hebrews, which was laid open before, or unto the ordinary dispensation of the gospel. In the first way it regards and expresseth the frequent addresses made unto the people of the Jews in the ministry of the word, for their healing and recovery from those ways of ruin wherein they were engaged. And so it may include the ministry of the prophets, with the close put unto it by that of Christ himself; concerning which see our exposition on Heb 1:1-2. And concerning this whole ministry it is that our Savior so expostulates with them, Mat 23:37, “How often would I have gathered your children !” And this also he at large represents in the parable of the householder and his vineyard, with the servants that he sent unto it from time to time to seek for fruit, and last of all his Son, Mat 21:33-37. Take it in the latter way, for the dispensation of the word in general, and the manner of it, with frequency and urgency, is included in this expression. Where the Lord Christ sends the gospel to be preached, it is his will that it should be so “instantly, in season and out of season,” that it may come as abundant showers of rain on the earth.

**3.** This rain is said to be *drunk in:* “The earth drinketh in the rain.” There is no more intended in this expression but the outward hearing of the word, a naked assent unto it. For it is ascribed unto them who continue utterly barren and unhealed; who are therefore left unto fire and destruction. But as it is the natural property of the earth to receive in the water that is poured on it, so men do in some sense drink in the doctrine of the gospel, when the natural faculties of their souls do apprehend it and assent unto it, though it work not upon them, though it produce no effects in them. There are, indeed, in the earth rocks and stones, on which the rain makes no impression; but they are considered in common with the rest of the earth, and there needs no particular exception on their account. Some there are who, when the word is preached unto them, do obstinately refuge and reject it; but the hearers in common are said to drink it in, and the other sort shall not escape the judgment which is appointed for them. And thus far things are spoken in general, what is common unto both those sorts of hearers, which he afterwards distinctly insists upon.

The word of the gospel, in the preaching of it, being compared unto rain, we may observe, that, —

**Obs. 2.** The dispensation of it unto men is an effect of the sovereign power and pleasure of God, as is the giving of rain unto the earth.

There is nothing in nature that God assumeth more into his prerogative than this of giving rain. The first mention of it in the world is in these words, “The LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth,” Gen 2:5. All rain is from the Lord God, who causeth it to rain or not to rain, at his pleasure. And the giving of it he pleads as a great pledge of his providence and goodness. “He left not himself” of old “without witness, in that he did good, and gave rain from heaven,” Act 14:17. Our Savior also makes it an argument of his goodness that he “causeth his rain to fall,” Mat 5:45. And whatever thoughts we have of the commonness of it, and whatever acquaintance men suppose they have with its causes, yet God distinguisheth himself, as to his almighty power, from all the idols of the world, that none of them can give rain. He calls his people to say in their hearts, “Let us fear the LORD our God, who giveth rain,” Jer 5:24.

“Are there any among the vanities of the Gentiles that can cause rain? or can the heavens give showers?” Jer 14:22.

And he exerciseth his sovereignty in the giving of it: Amo 4:7-8, “I caused it to rain upon one city, and not to rain upon another: one piece was rained upon, and the piece whereupon it rained not withered. So two or three cities wandered unto one city to drink water.” And thus is it absolutely as to the dispensation of the gospel to nations, cities, places, persons; it is at God’s disposal alone, and he useth a distinguishing sovereignty therein. He sendeth his word unto one people and not to another, to one city and not to another, at one time and not at another; and these are those matters of his whereof he giveth no account. Only some things we may consider, which give us a prospect into the glory of his wisdom and grace herein: and this I shall do in two instances; first, in the principle of his dispensation; secondly, in the outward means of it. As, —

**1.** The *principal end* which he designeth in his disposal of the dispensation of the gospel in that great variety wherein we do behold it, is the conversion, edification, and salvation of his elect. This is that which he aimeth to accomplish thereby; and therefore his will and purpose herein is that which gives rule and measure unto the actings of his providence concerning it. Wherever there are any of his elect to be called, or in what time soever, there and then will he cause the gospel to be preached; for the purpose of God, which is according to election, must stand, whatever difficulties lie in the way, Rom 9:11. And the election must obtain, Rom 11:7. So the Lord Christ prayed that he would take care of all those that he had given unto him, which were his own by election (“Thine they were, and thou gavest them unto me”), and sanctify them by his word, Joh 17:17. In pursuit of his own purpose, and in answer unto that prayer of our Lord Jesus, he will send his word to find them out wherever they are, that so not one grain of his chosen Israel shall be lost or fall to the ground. So he appointed our apostle to stay and preach at Corinth, notwithstanding the difficulties and oppositions he met withal, because “he had much people in that city,” Act 18:9-10. They were his people by eternal designation, antecedently unto their effectual vocation; and therefore he will have the word preached unto them. And in the hard work of his ministry, the same apostle, who knew the end of it, affirms that “he endured all things for the elect’s sakes,” 2Ti 2:10. That they might be called and saved was the work he was sent upon. For “whom he did predestinate, them he also calleth,” Rom 8:30. Predestination is the rule of effectual vocation; all and only they are so called by the word who are predestinated. So speaks our Savior also,

“Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice,” Joh 10:16.

He had some sheep in that fold of the church of the Jews; to them, therefore, he preached the word, that they might be gathered unto him. But he had other sheep also, even all his elect among the Gentiles, and saith he, “Them must I gather also.” There is a *necessity of it,* upon the account of the purpose of God concerning them; and they are to be gathered by hearing of his voice, or the preaching of the word. In that sovereignty, therefore, which God useth in the disposal thereof, causing the rain of the doctrine of his word to fall upon one place and not upon another, at one time and not at another, he hath still this certain end before him; and the actings of his providence are regulated by the purposes of his grace. In what place or nation soever, in what time or age soever, he hath any of his elect to be brought forth in the world, he will provide that the gospel of peace be preached unto them. I will not say that in every individual place where the gospel is preached there are always some of the elect to be saved. For the enjoyments of one place may be occasioned by the work that is to be done in another, wherewith it is in some kind of conjunction: or the word may be preached in a place for the sake of some that are there only accidentally; as when Paul first preached at Philippi, Lydia only was converted, who was a stranger in those parts, belonging to the city of Thyatira in Asia, Act 16:14-15 : and a whole country may fare the better for one city, and a whole city for some part of it, as Mic 5:7. God concealeth this secret design under promiscuous outward dispensations. For he obligeth those by whom the word is preached to declare his mind therein unto all men indefinitely, leaving the effectual work of his grace in the pursuit of his purpose unto himself; whence “they believe who are ordained to eternal life,” and “those are added to the church that are to be saved,” Act 2:47; Act 13:48. Besides, God hath other ends also in the sending of his word, though this be the principal. For by it he puts a restraint unto sin in the world, gives a visible control to the kingdom of Satan, and relieves mankind, by sending light into those dark places of the earth which are filled with habitations of cruelty. And by the convictions that he brings thereby on the minds and consciences of men, he makes way for the manifestation of the glory of his justice in their condetonation. Coming and speaking unto them, he leaves them without pretense or excuse, Joh 15:22. Yet will I not say that God sends the word for any continuance for these ends and designs only. For a short time he may do so; as our Savior, sending forth his disciples to preach, supposeth that in some place their message may be totally rejected, and thereon appointed them to “shake off the dust of their feet as a testimony against them,” or their being left without excuse. But these are but secondary and accidental ends of the word where it is constantly preached*.* Wherefore God doth not so send it for their sakes alone. But on the other side, I dare say, that where God doth not, by any means, nor in any degree, send his word, there are none of his elect to be saved; for without the word they can neither be called nor sanctified. And if any of them are in any such place as whereunto he will not grant his word, he will, by one providence or other, snatch them like brands out of the fire, and convey them under, the showers of it. And this we find verified by experience every day. The gospel, therefore, doth not pass up and down the world by chance, as we know in how great variety it hath visited and left nations and people, ages and times; nor is the disposal of it regulated by the wisdom and contrivance of men, whatever their work and duty may be in the dispensation of it; but all this, like the falling of the rain, is regulated by the sovereign wisdom and pleasure of God, wherein he hath respect only unto the purpose of his own eternal grace.

**2.** He doth, according to his sovereign pleasure, call and send persons to the preaching of it unto those to whom he will grant the privilege thereof. Every man may not upon his own head, nor can any man upon his own abilities, undertake and discharge that work. This is the eternal rule and law of the gospel: “Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” But “how shall men call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? and how shall they preach except they be sent? Rom 10:13-15, — that is, by God himself: for neither doth the apostle discourse, nor hath he any occasion in that place to discourse, concerning the ordinary call of persons unto an office in the church, whereunto the ministry of the church itself is required; but he treats of preaching the gospel in general unto all or any parts of the world, and of the love and care of God in sending of men unto that purpose, whereby others coming to hear of him, may believe in him, call upon his name, and be saved. Hence he compares the work of God herein unto that of his sending forth light and natural instructions unto all the world by the luminaries of heaven, wherein the ministry of man hath no place, verse 18. Wherefore the preaching of the gospel depends absolutely on the sovereign pleasure of God in sending men unto that work; for “how should they preach except they be sent?” And he doth send them, —

**(1.)** By endowing them with spiritual gifts, enabling them unto that work and duty. The gospel is “the ministration of the Spirit;*”* nor is it to be administered but by virtue of the gifts of the Spirit. These God gives unto them whom he sends, by Jesus Christ, Eph 4:7-8, etc. And these gifts are a sort of especial, peculiar, yea, supernatural abilities, whereby men are fitted to and enabled for the dispensation of the gospel. It is sad to consider what woful work they make who undertake this duty, and are yet unfurnished with these abilities; that is, such who are sent of men, but are not sent of God. They harness themselves with external order, ecclesiastical mission, according to some rules agreed upon among themselves, with some other implements and ornamental accoutrements*;* whereon they undertake to be preachers of the gospel, as it were whether God will or no. But these vanities of the Gentiles cannot give rain; the preaching of the gospel, as unto its proper ends, depends on God’s sending alone. When they betake themselves to their work, they find themselves at a loss for God’s mission; at least they do so unto whom they pretend to be sent. I speak it not as though outward order and a due call were not necessary in a church unto the office of a teacher, but only to show that all order without a concurrence of the divine vocation is of no validity nor efficacy*.* Now, the dispensation of these spiritual gifts, without which the rain of the doctrine of the gospel falleth not, depends solely on the sovereignty of God. The Spirit divideth unto every one as he pleaseth, 1Co 12:11. And it is evident that he doth not herein follow the rule of any human preparation. For whereas it is most certain, that the improvement of men’s intellectual abilities, in wisdom, learning, oratory, and the like, is exceedingly subservient unto the use and exercise of these spiritual gifts, yet it is evident that God doth not always and regularly communicate them unto those who are so prepared; no, though they were acquired in a rational way, in order unto the work of the ministry. For how many may we see so qualified, and yet destitute of all relish of spiritual gifts, God preferring before them persons, it may be, behind and beneath them in those qualifications! So it was whilst all these affairs were transacted in an extraordinary manner at the first planting of the gospel. He did not choose out eminently the philosophers, the wise, the learned, the scribes, the disputers of this world, to communicate spiritual gifts unto; but generally fixed on persons of another condition and more ordinary capacity. Some were so, that none might think themselves excluded because of their wisdom and learning, — things excellent in themselves; but many of this sort, as our apostle informs us, were not called and chosen unto this work. So something in proportion hereunto may yet be observed in the distribution of the ordinary gifts of the Spirit; at least it is evident that herein God obligeth himself to no rules of such preparations or qualifications on our part. Nay, which is yet further, he walks not herein in the steps of his own sanctifying and saving grace; but as he worketh that grace in the hearts of many on whom be bestows not those gifts which are needful to enable men unto the dispensation of the gospel, so he bestows those gifts on many unto whom he will not vouchsafe his sanctifying grace. And these things make evident that sovereignty which God is pleased to exercise in his sending of persons unto the work of preaching the gospel, manifesting that the whole of it depends, like the giving of rain, absolutely on his pleasure. And when men exclusively unto this part of God’s call will keep up a ministry, and so make a preaching of the gospel, it is but a lifeless image of the true dispensation of it.

**(2.)** This communication of gifts unto men is ordinarily accompanied with a *powerful and effectual inclination* of the minds of men to undertake the work and engage in it, against those objections, discouragements, oppositions, and difficulties, which present themselves unto them in their undertaking. There is so, I say, ordinarily: for there are more instances than one of those who, having the word of prophecy committed unto them, instead of going to Nineveh, do consult their own reputation, ease, and advantage, and so tack about to Tarshish; and there are not a few who hide and napkin up their talents, which are given them to trade withal, though represented unto us under one instance only: But these must one day answer for their disobedience unto the heavenly call. But ordinarily that inclination and disposition unto this work, which accompanies the communication of spiritual gifts, is prevalent and effectual, so that the minds of men are fortified by it against the lions that are in the way, or whatever may rise up to deter them from it. So our apostle affirms, that upon the revelation of Christ unto him, and his call thereby to preach the gospel, “immediately he conferred not with flesh and blood, but went into Arabia” about his work, Gal 1:16-17. He would not so much as attend or hearken unto cavils and exceptions against the work whereunto he was inclined and disposed; which is the way of a well-grounded, firm resolution. And something in proportion hereunto is wrought in the minds of them who undertake this work upon an ordinary call of God. And where this is not, much success is not to be expected in the work of any, nor any great blessing of God upon it. When men go out hereunto in their own strength, without a supply of spiritual gifts, and engage in their work merely upon external considerations, without this divine inclination of their hearts and minds, they may seem to cast out water as out of an engine, by violent compression, — they will never be like clouds to pour forth showers of rain. This, therefore, also is from the Lord. Again, —

**Obs. 3.** God ordereth things, in his sovereign, unsearchable providence, so as that the gospel shall be sent unto, and in the administration of it shall find admittance into, what places, and at what times, seem good unto himself, even as he orders the rain to fall on one place, and not on another. — We have not wisdom to search into the causes, reasons, and ends of God’s providential works in the world; and individual persons seldom live to see the issue of those which are on the wheel in their own days. But we have ground enough in the Scripture to conclude, that the principal works of divine providence in the world, and among the nations of the earth, do respect the dispensation of the gospel, either in the granting of it or the taking of it away. It were an easy matter to evince by evident instances that the principal national revolutions which have been in the earth, have been all of them subservient unto the counsel and purpose of God in this matter. And there are examples also manifesting how small occasions he hath turned unto great and signal use herein. But what hath been spoken may suffice to evince who is the Father and Author of this rain. And how this consideration may be improved unto the exercise of faith, prayer, and thankfulness, is manifest.

This rain is said to fall upon the earth; which respects the actual dispensation of the word by them unto whom it is committed. And we may thence observe, that, —

**Obs. 4.** It is the duty of those unto whom the dispensation of the word is committed of God, to be diligent, watchful, instant in their work, that their doctrine may, as it were, continually drop and distil upon their hearers, that the rain may fall often on the earth. So hath God provided that “the ridges of it may be watered abundantly, to make it soft” (or “dissolve it”) “with showers; and so he blesseth the springing thereof,” Psa 65:10. In a hot, parching, and dry season, one or two showers do but increase the vehemency of the heat and drought, giving matter of new exhalations, which are accompanied with some of the remaining moisture of the earth. Of no other use is that dead and lazy kind of preaching wherewith some satisfy themselves, and would force others to be contented.

The apostles, when this work was committed unto them, would not be diverted from a constant attendance unto it by any other duty, much less any other occasion of life, Act 6:2-4. See what a charge our apostle gives unto Timothy to this purpose, 2Ti 4:1-5. And a great example hereof we have in the account he gives concerning his own ministry in Asia, Act 20:1. He declares *when* he began his work and ministry, — “ the first day he *came* into Asia,” Act 20:18; that is, on the first opportunity: he omitted no season that he could possibly lay hold upon, but engaged into his work, as his manner was in every place that he came unto. And, *2. In what manner* did he teach? He did it,

**(1.)** *Publicly,* in all assemblies of the church, and others also where he might have a quiet opportunity of speaking; and,

**(2.)** *Privately,* “from house to house,” Act 20:20. All places were alike to him, and all assemblies, small or great, so he might have advantage of communicating unto them the knowledge of God in Christ. And,

**3.** *What* did he so declare unto them, or instruct them in? It was “the whole counsel of God,” Act 20:27; “the gospel of the grace of God,” Act 20:24; all things that were “profitable unto them,” Act 20:20; in sum, “repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ,” Act 20:21.

And, **4.** How did he dispense the word unto them? It was by a declaration of the will of God, Act 20:27; by testifying the necessity of gospel duties, Act 20:21; by constant warnings and admonitions, to stir men up unto diligence in obedience*,* and to caution them of their dangers, Act 20:31. And,

**5.** *When,* or at what season, did he thus lay out himself in the discharge of this duty? He did it “night and day,” Act 20:31; that is, continually, upon all occasions and advantages. He was one by whom God watered his vineyard every moment. And,

**6.** In what *outward condition* was he, and with what frame of spirit did he attend his work? He was in “many temptations, which befell him by the lying in wait of the Jews,” Act 20:19, or in continual danger of his life by the persecutions they stirred up against him. And as unto himself, and the frame of his heart in this work, he carried it on “with all humility of mind, and with many tears,” Act 20:19; Act 20:31. He was not lifted up with conceits of the glory, greatness, and power of his office, of the authority over all the churches committed unto him by Christ; but with lowliness of mind and meekness was as the servant of them all; with that love, tenderness, compassion, and fervency, as he could not but testify by many tears. Here is the great example for dispensers of the gospel. We have not his grace, we have not his gifts, we have not his ability and assistance, and so are not able to come up unto him; but yet certainly it is our duty to follow him though “baud passibus aequis,” and to conform ourselves unto him according to our opportunity and ability. I confess I cannot but admire to think what some men conceive concerning him, or themselves. Can they say, that from the first day of their coming into their dioceses or dignities, or parishes or places, they have thus behaved themselves? Have they so taught, so preached, so warned, and that “with tears, night and day,” all sorts of persons whom they suppose themselves to relate unto? Have they made it their work to declare the mysteries of the gospel, and “the whole counsel of God,” and this both publicly and privately, night and day, according to their opportunities? It will be said, indeed, that these things belonged unto the duty and office of the apostles, but those that succeed them as ordinary overseers of the church may live in another manner, and have other work to do. If they should carry it with that humility of mind as he did, and use entreaties with tears as he did, and preach continually as he did, they should have little joy of their office; and besides, they should be even despised of the people. These things, therefore, they suppose not to belong unto them. Yea, but our apostle gives this whole account concerning himself unto the ordinary bishops of the church of Ephesus, Act 20:17; Act 20:28; and in the close of it tells them, that he had showed them all things how they ought to do, Act 20:35. And what he apprehended to be the duty of all to whom the dispensation of the word is committed, he manifests in his last solemn charge that he left with his son Timothy a little before his death: 2Ti 4:1-2,

“I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; preach the word, be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine;”

so 2Ti 4:5. He did no more himself than what he requires in Timothy, according to the proportion of his abilities. And the discharge of this work is not to be measured by particular instances of the frequency of preaching, but by that purpose, design, and frame of heart, which ought to be in ministers, of laying out themselves to the utmost in the work of the ministry on all occasions, resolving “to spend and to be spent” therein. I could easily show on how many accounts frequency and urgency in preaching of the word are indispensably required of those unto whom the work is committed, that therein the rain may fall oft upon the earth; but I must not too far digress. The command of God; the love and care of Christ towards his church; the ends of God’s patience and long-suffering; the future manifestation of his glory in the salvation of believers and the condemnation of those that are disobedient; the necessities of the souls of men; the nature and kind of the way whereby God gives spiritual supplies by the ministry of the word; the weakness of our natural faculties of the mind in receiving, Heb 5:11, Isa 28:9-10, and of the memory in retaining spiritual things, Heb 2:1; Heb 12:5; the weakness of grace, Rev 2:2, requiring continual refreshments, Isa 27:3; the frequency and variety of temptations, interrupting our peace with God, nor otherwise to be repelled, 2Co 12:8-9; the design of Christ to bring us gradually unto perfection, — might all be pleaded in this case: but the law of this duty is in some measure written in the hearts of all faithful ministers, and those who are otherwise shall bear their own burdens. Again; it is common to the whole earth often to drink in the rain that falls upon it, though but some parts only of it prove fruitful, as it will appear in the following distribution of them. Whence we may observe, that, —

**Obs. 5.** Attendance unto the word preached, hearing of it with some diligence, and giving of it some kind of reception, make no great difference among men; for this is common unto them who never become fruitful. — This is so plainly exemplified by our Savior in the parable of the several sorts of ground that receive the seed of the word, yet on various occasions lose the power of it, and never come to fruit-bearing, that it needs no further consideration. And I intend not those only who merely hear the word, and no more. Such persons are like stones, which when the rain falleth on them it makes no impression into them; they drink it not in at all. It is no otherwise, I say, with many hearers, who seem not to have the least sense of what customarily they attend unto. But those are intended in the text and proposition who in some measure receive it and drink it in. They give it an entrance into their understandings, where they become doctrinally acquainted with the truth of the gospel; and they give it some entrance into their affections, whence they are said to “receive the word with joy;” and moreover, they allow it some influence on their conversations. — as even Herod did, who heard the preachings of John Baptist “gladly, and did many things” thereon. All these things men may do, and yet at length prove to be that part of the earth which drinks in the rain and is yet absolutely barren, and brings forth thorns and briers. There is yet wanting the “receiving of it in a good and honest heart;” which what it includes will afterwards appear. And again we may observe, that, —

**Obs. 6.** God is pleased to exercise much patience towards those whom he once grants the mercy and the privilege of his word unto. — He doth not presently proceed against them for and on their barrenness, but stays until the rain hath often fallen upon the ground. But there is an appointed season and period of time, beyond which he will not wait for them any more, as we shall see.

**Thirdly**, The distribution of this earth into several parts, with the different lots and events of them, is nextly to be considered. The *first* sort the apostle describes two ways:

**1.** By its *fruitfulness;*

**2.** By its *acceptation with God.* And this fruitfulness he further manifests:

**(1.)** From the fruit itself which it bears, — it is “herb,” or “herbs;*”*

**(2.)** From the nature and use of that fruit, — it is “meet for them by whom it is dressed;*”*

**(3.)** The manner of it, — it *“*bringeth it forth.” These things we must a little open in their order, as they lie in the text: —

**1.** Τίκτει, it “bringeth forth.” Τίκτουσα βοτάνην. This word properly signifies the bringing forth of a woman that hath conceived with child: Συλλήψῃ ἐν γαστρὶ, καὶ τέξῃ υἱόν, Luk 1:31. And so it is constantly used in the New Testament, and not otherwise but only in this place and Jas 1:15, ῾Η ἐπιθμυία συλλαβοῦσα τίκτει ἀμαρτίαν. In an elegant similitude, he compareth the work of lust in temptation unto an adulterous conception in the womb of the adulteress, when at length actual sin is brought forth. The seeds of it are cast into the mind and will by temptation; where, after they are warmed, fomented, and cherished, sin, that ugly monster, comes forth into the world. So is this earth said to “bring forth,” as a womb that is naturally and kindly impregnated, in its appointed season. And therefore, when the apostle speaks of the other sort, he changeth his expression for such a word as may suit a deformed and monstrous production. But the native power of the earth, being cherished by the rain that falls on it, brings forth as from a teeming womb the fruits of those seeds it is possessed withal.

**2.** It” bringeth forth βοτάνην,” “generans herbam.” The Rhemists render it “grass,” causelessly and amiss. The word signifies such “green herbs” as are usually produced by careful culture, tilling, or dressing; such as are for the proper and immediate use of men, and not of their cattle. The same with דֶּשֶׁא, Gen 1:11, — all sorts of useful green herbs, whether medicinal or for food, or beauty and ornament.

**3.** The nature of this herbal fruit is, that it is εὔθετος*.* Some render it by “opportuna,” and some by “accommoda;” “meet” answers both. Those that use the former word seem to respect the season wherein it brings forth the fruit. And this is the commendation of it, that it makes no delay, but brings forth in its proper time and season, when its owners and tillers have just ground and reason to expect and look for it. And it is an especial commendation of any thing that beareth fruit; and what is out of season is despised, Psa 1:3. The latter word intends the usefuless and profitableness of the fruit brought forth, in what season soever it be. We may comprise both senses, and justly suppose both of them to be intended. The Syriac expresseth it by a general word, דְּחָשָׁח*, “*which is” or “may be of use.” And the fruits of the earth are not profitable unless they are seasonable. So James calls it τίμιον καρπὸν τῆς γῆς, “the precious fruit of the earth,” which the husbandman waiteth for, until the earth hath received the former and latter rain, Jas 5:7.

**4.** Lastly, These herbs thus brought forth are “meet ἐκείνοις δι᾿ οὕς καὶ γεωργεῖται,” “unto them by whom it is tilled,” or “even by whom;’or “by whom it is also tilled.” The particle καί is not superfluous or insignificant. It declares an addition of culture to the rain. For besides the falling of rain on the earth, there is likewise need of further culture, that it may be made fruitful, or bring forth herbs seasonably, which shall be profitable unto men. For if only the rain fall upon it, it will bring forth many things indeed; but if it be not tilled withal, for one useful herb it will bring forth many weeds; as he speaks in the case of husbandry, Virg. Georg. lib. 1:155: —

***“Quod nisi et assiduis terram insectabere rastris,***

***Et sonitu terrebis aves, et ruris opaci***

***Falce premes umbras, votisque vocaveris imbrem;***

***Heu magnum alterius frustra spectabis acervum.”***

The earth must be tilled, from its nature and the law of its creation, And therefore Adam was to have tilled and wrought the ground in the garden even before the fall, Gen 2:15. And this is the principal concernment of him that intends to live on the field. The falling of rain upon the earth is common unto the whole. That which gives a field a peculiar relation unto any one is, that he dresseth, and fenceth, and tilleth it. Unto these dressers the herbs that are brought forth are said to be “meet;” they belong unto them, and are useful for them. Δι᾿ οὕς may be rendered “for whom,” or “by whom.” In the first way, the chief owner of the ground, the lord of the field or vineyard, is signified. The ground is tilled or manured for his use, and he eats of the fruits of it. In the latter sense, those who immediately work about the ground in the tilling of it are intended. But there is no need to distinguish in this place between owner and dresser; for God as he is the great husbandman is both. He is the Lord of the vineyard, it is his, and he dresseth and pruneth the vines, that they may bring forth fruit, Joh 15:1-2. Again; the ground, thus made fruitful, “receiveth blessing of God.” And the blessing of God with respect unto a fruitful field is twofold, —

**(1.)** *Antecedent,* in the communication of goodness, or fruit-causing virtue to it. “The smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the LORD hath blessed,” Gen 27:27; — a field that abounds with blossoms, flowers, and fruits, yielding a sweet savor; being so made fruitful by the singular blessing of God. But this is not the blessing here intended; for it is supposed that this field is already made fruitful, so as to bring forth useful herbs; and therefore it must be antecedently interested in this kind of blessing, without which nothing can thrive or prosper. Wherefore,

**(2.)** God’s benediction is taken for *consequent acceptation* or *approbation,* with care and watchfulness for a further improvement. The blessing of God is at large described, Isa 27:2-3.

And there are three things included in this blessing of a fruitful field: —

**(1.)** The *owning,* acceptation, or approbation of it. Such a field God owns, and is not ashamed that it should be looked on as his. And this is opposed to the rejection of the barren ground afterwards mentioned, — “is rejected.”

**(2.)** The *care,* watchfulness, and diligence that are used about it. God watcheth over such a field or vineyard to keep it night and day, that none should hurt it, watering it every moment, and purging the branches of its vines, to make them yet more fruitful; — opposed to “being nigh unto cursing;” that is, wholly neglected, or left unto salt and barrenness.

**(3.)** A final *preservation* from all evil; — opposed to the burning up of the barren earth, with the thorns and briers that grow upon it.

These things being spoken only of the ground, whence the comparison is taken, the application of them, though not expressed, unto the spiritual things intended is plain and easy. For, —

**1.** The ground thus dressed, thus bearing fruit, and blessed of God, is true and sound believers. So our Savior declares it to be in the interpretation of his own parable to this purpose, Matthew 13. They are such as “receive the word of God in good and honest hearts,” and bring forth fruits of it in several degrees; — such as, having been ministerially planted and watered, have an increase wrought in them by the grace of God, 1Co 2:6-7.

**2.** There is included herein the *manner* how they bring forth the fruits intended; and that is, that they bring forth in their lives what was before conceived and cherished in their hearts. They have the root in themselves of what they bring forth. So doth the word here used signify, namely, to bring forth the fruit of an inward conception. The doctrine of the gospel, as cast into their hearts, is not only rain, but seed also. This is cherished by grace as precious seed; and, as from a natural root or principle in the heart, brings forth precious fruit. And herein consists the difference between the fruit-bearing of true believers and the works of hypocrites or false professors: These latter bring forth fruits like mushrooms; — they come up suddenly, have ofttimes a great bulk and goodly appearance, but they are only a forced excrescency, they have no natural seed or root in the earth. They do not proceed from a living principle of them in their hearts.

The other sort do first conceive, cherish, and foment them in their hearts and minds; whence they bring them forth as from a genuine and natural principle. This is on either side fully declared by our Savior himself, Luk 6:43-45.

**3.** There are the *herbs or fruits intended.* These are they which elsewhere in the Scripture are called “the fruits of the Spirit,” “the fruits of righteousness,” of “holiness,” and the like. All that we do in compliance with the will of God, in the course of our profession and obedience, is of this kind. All effects of faith and love, of mortification and sanctification, that are holy in themselves and useful to others, whereby we express the truth and power of that doctrine of the gospel which we do profess, are the fruits and herbs intended. When our hearts are made holy and our lives useful by the gospel, then are we fruitful.

**4.** These herbs are said to be “meet for them by whom” (or “for whom”) “the earth is dressed.” As it is neither useful nor safe to press similitudes beyond their principal scope and intention, and to bring in every minute circumstance into the comparison; so we must not neglect what is fairly instructive in them, especially if the application of things one to another have countenance and guidance given it in other places of the Scripture, as it is in this case. Wherefore, to clear the application of this part of the similitude, we may observe, —

**(1.)** That God himself is the *great husbandman,* Joh 15:1; and all believers are “God’s husbandry,” 1Co 2:9. He is so the husbandman as to be the sovereign Lord and Owner of this field or vineyard; and he puts workmen into it to dress it. This our Savior sets out at large in his parable, Mat 21:33, etc. Hence he calls his people his “portion,” and “the lot of his inheritance,” Deu 32:9. He speaks as though he had given up all the world besides into the possession of others, and kept his people only unto himself. And so he hath, as to the especial blessed relation which he intendeth.

**(2.)** It is God himself who taketh care for *the watering and dressing* of this field. He dealeth with it as a man doth with a field that is his own. This he expresseth, Isa 5:2; Mat 21:33-34. The dispensation of the word, and the communication of the Spirit unto the church, with all other means of light, grace, and growth, depend all on his care, and are all supremely from him, as was showed before. To this end he employeth his servants to work and dress it under him, who are “laborers together with God,” 1Co 2:9; because they are employed by him, do his work, and have the same end with him.

**(3.)** This *tilling or dressing* of the earth, which is superadded to the rain, or the mere preaching of the gospel, denoted thereby, may be referred unto three heads:

**[1.]** The *ministerial application* of the word unto the souls and consciences of men, in the dispensation of all the ordinances of the gospel. This is the second great end of the ministry, as the dispensation of the word in general, or the rain, is the first.

**[2.]** The *administration of the censures and discipline* of the church. This belongs unto the dressing and purging of God’s vineyard; and of singular use it is unto that end, where it is rightly and duly attended unto. And those who, under pretense hereof, instead of purging the vineyard, endeavor to dig up the vines, will have little thanks from him for their diligence and pains.

**[3.]** *Afflictions and trials.* By these he purgeth his vine, that it may bring forth yet more fruit; that is, he trieth, exerciseth, and thereby improveth, the faith and graces of believers, 1Pe 1:7; Rom 5:3-5; Jas 1:2-4.

**(4.)** God *expecteth fruit from this field,* which is so his own, and which he so careth for: “I looked for grapes,” Isa 5:2. He sends his servants to receive the fruits of it, Mat 21:34. Though he stands in no need of us or our goodness, — it extends not to him, we cannot profit him as a man may profit his neighbor, nor will he grow rich with our substance, — yet he is graciously pleased to esteem the fruits of gospel obedience, the fruits of faith and love, of righteousness and holiness; and by them will he be glorified: “Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit,” Joh 15:8; Mat 5:16.

**(5.)** These fruits, when they are brought forth, God *approveth of, accepteth,* and further blesseth them that bear them; which is the last thing in the words. Some think there is no use of these fruits, unless they are meritorious of grace and glory. But God’s acceptation of them here is called his *benediction,* his blessing of them that bring them forth. Now a blessing cannot be merited; it is an act of bounty and authority, and hath the nature of a free gift, that cannot be deserved. What doth a field merit of him by whom it is watered and tilled, when it bringeth forth herbs meet for his use? they are all but the fruits of his own labor, cost, and pains. The field is only the subject that he hath wrought upon, and it is his own. All the fruits of our obedience are but the effects of his grace in us. We are a subject that he hath graciously been pleased to work upon. Only he is pleased, in a way of infinite condescension, to own in us what is his own, and to pardon what is ours. Wherefore the blessing of God on fruit-bearing believers consists in three things: —

**[1.]** His *approbation* and gracious acceptance of them. So it is said that “he had respect unto Abel and to his offering,” Gen 4:4. He graciously accepted both of his person and of his sacrifice, owning and approving of him, when Cain and his were rejected. So “he smelled a savor of rest” from the sacrifice of Noah, Gen 8:21. And to testify his being well pleased therewith, he thence took occasion to renew and establish his covenant with him and his seed.

**[2.]** It is by *increasing their fruitfulness.* “Every branch” in the vine “that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit,” Joh 15:2. He *“*multiplieth the seed that is sown,” and “increaseth the fruits of their righteousness,” 2Co 9:10. This is the constant way of God in his covenant-dealings with thriving, fruitful Christians; he so blesseth them as that their graces and fruits shall more and more abound, so as that they shall be flourishing even in old age, and bring forth more fruit unto the end. **[3.]** He blesseth them in the preparation he hath made for to give them an everlasting reward. A reward it is, indeed, of grace and bounty, but it is still a reward, “a recompence of reward.” For although it be no way merited or deserved, and although there be no proportion between our works, duties, or fruits, and it, yet, because they shall be owned in it, shall not be lost nor forgotten, and God therein testifies his acceptance of them, it is their reward.

**Obs. 7.** Where God grants means, there he expects fruit.

Few men consider what is the state of things with them, whilst the gospel is preached unto them. Some utterly disregard it any further than as it is suited unto their carnal interests and advantages; for the gospel is at present so stated in the world, at least in many parts of it, that great multitudes make more benefit by a pretense of it, or what belongs unto it, and have greater secular advancements and advantages thereby, than they could possibly, by the utmost of their diligence and ability in any other way, honest or dishonest, attain unto. These esteem it according to their worldly interests, and for the most part no otherwise; they are merchants of souls, Rev 18:11-13; 2Pe 2:3. Some look upon it as that wherein they are really concerned, and they will both take upon themselves the profession of it, and make use of it in their consciences as occasion doth require. But few there are who do seriously consider what is the errand that it comes upon, and what the work is God hath in hand thereby. In brief, he is by it watering, manuring, cultivating the souls of men, that they may bring forth fruit unto his praise and glory. His business by it is to make men holy, humble, self-denying, righteous, useful, upright, pure in heart and life, to abound in good works, or to be like himself in all things. To effect these ends is this holy means suited; and therefore God is justly said to expect these fruits where he grants this means. And if these be not found in us, all the ends of God’s husbandry are lost towards us; which what a doleful issue it will have the next verse declares. This, therefore, ought to be always in our minds whilst God is treating with us by the dispensation of the gospel. It is fruit he aims at, it is fruit he looks for: and if we fail herein, the advantage of the whole, both as unto our good and his glory, is utterly lost; which we must unavoidably account for. For this fruit God both expecteth and will require. This is the work and effect of the gospel, Col 1:6. And the fruit of it is threefold: —

**1.** Of *persons,* in their conversion unto God, Rom 15:16.

**2.** Of *real internal holiness* in them, or the fruits of the Spirit, Gal 5:22-23.

**3.** The *outward fruits of righteousness* and charity, 2Co 9:10; Php 1:11.

These God looketh to, Isa 5:4; Luk 13:7; and he will not always bear with a frustration. A good husbandman will suffer thorns and barren trees to grow in the field; but if a vine or fig-tree be barren in his garden, he will cut it down and cast it into the fire. However, God will not always continue this husbandry, Isaiah 28; Amo 6:12-14.

**Obs. 8.** Duties of gospel obedience are fruits meet for God, things that have a proper and *especial* tendency unto his glory. — As the precious fruits of the earth, which the husbandman waiteth for, are meet for his use, — that is, such as supply his wants, satisfy his occasions, answer his labor and charge, nourish and enrich him, — so do these duties of gospel obedience answer all the ends of God’s glory which he hath designed unto it in the world. “Herein,” saith our Savior, “is my Father glorified, that ye bring forth much fruit.”

And we must inquire how these fruits are meet for God. For,

**1.** They are not so, as though he stood in any need of them unto his glory. “Our goodness extendeth not to him,” Psa 16:2. It doth not so, as though he had need of it, or put any value on it for its own sake. Hence he rejected all those multiplied outward services which men trusted unto, as if they obliged him by them; because without them or their services he is the sovereign possessor of all created beings and their effects, Psa 50:7-12. All thoughts hereof are to be rejected. See Job 22:2-3; Job 35:7-8.

**2.** They are not meet for God, as if they perfectly answered his law. For with respect thereunto, “all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags,” most unmeet to be .presented unto him, Isa 64:6. And if he should mark what is amiss in us or them, who could stand? Psa 130:3.

**3.** Much less are they so meet for him, as that by them we should merit any thing at his hand. This foolish presumption is contrary to the very nature of God and man, with that relation between them which necessarily ensues on their very beings. For what can a poor worm of the earth, who is nothing, who hath nothing, who doth nothing that is good, but what it receives wholly from divine grace, favor, and bounty, merit of Him who, from his being and nature, can be under no obligation thereunto, but what is merely from his own sovereign pleasure and goodness?

They are, therefore, no otherwise meet for God but in and through Christ, according to the infinite condescension which he is pleased to exercise in the covenant of grace. Therein doth the Lord Christ,

**1.** Make our *persons accepted,* as was that of Abel, through faith in him; which was the foundation of the acceptation of his offering, Gen 4:4; Heb 11:4. And this is of grace also; it is “to the praise of his glorious grace, wherein he maketh us accepted in the Beloved,” Eph 1:6. And,

**2.** He *bears and takes away the iniquity* that cleaves unto them as they proceed from us, which renders them unmeet for God. This was typed out by the plate of gold, whereon was inscribed “Holiness to the LORD,” that was on the forehead of the high priest. It was that he might “bear the iniquity of the holy things” of the people, Exo 28:36-38. He bare it in the expiation he made of all sin, and takes it away in the sight of God. And,

**3.** *He adds of the incense* of his own mediation unto them, that they may have a sweet savor in their offering to God, Rev 8:3. On this foundation it is that God hath graciously designed them unto sundry ends of his glow, and accepts them accordingly.

For, —

**1.** The *will of his command* is fulfilled thereby; and this tends to the glory of his rule and government, Mat 7:21. We are to pray that the will of God may be done on earth, as it is in heaven. The glory that God hath in heaven, from the ministry of all his holy angels, consists in this, that they always, with all readiness and cheerfulness, do observe his commands and do his will, esteeming their doing so to be their honor and blessedness. For hereby is the rule and authority of God owned, avouched, exalted; a neglect whereof was the sin and ruin of the apostate angels. In like manner our fruits of obedience are the only acknowledgments that we can or do make to the supreme authority and rule of God over us, as the one lawgiver, who hath power to kill and keep alive. The glory of an earthly king consists principally in the willing obedience which his subjects give unto his laws. For hereby they expressly acknowledge that they esteem his laws wise, just, equal, useful to mankind, and also reverence his authority. And it is the glory of God, when the subjects of his kingdom do testify unto all, their willing, cheerful subjection unto all his laws, as holy, righteous, and good, by the fruits of their obedience; as also that it is their principal honor and happiness to be engaged in his service, Joh 15:14. Hereby is our heavenly Father glorified, as he is our great king and lawgiver.

**2.** There is in the fruits of obedience *an expression of the nature, power, and efficacy of the grace of God,* whereby also he is glorified; for he doth all things “to the praise of the glory of his grace,” Eph 1:6. In all the actings of lust and sin, in the drought and dust of barrenness, we represent an enmity against him, and contrariety unto him, acting over the principle of the first rebellion and apostasy from him. These things, in their own nature, tend greatly to his dishonor, Eze 36:20. But these fruits of obedience are all effects of his grace, wherein he “worketh in us to will and to do of his own good pleasure.” And hereby are both the power and nature of that grace manifested and glorified. The power of it, in making fruitful the barren soils of our hearts, which, as under the curse, would of themselves bring forth nothing but thorns and briers. Wherefore, to cause our hearts to abound in the fruits of faith, love, meekness, and all holy, evangelical obedience, is that wherein the power of God’s grace is both manifested and magnified, Isa 11:5-8. And they also declare the nature of God. For they are all of them things good, benign, beautiful, useful to mankind; such as give peace, quietness, and blessedness unto the souls of them in whom they are; as tend to the restoration of all things in their proper order, and unto the relief of the universe, laboring under its confusion and vanity, Php 4:8. Such, I say, are all the fruits of holy obedience in believers; such is their nature and tendency, whereby they declare what that grace is from which they do proceed, and whose effects they are, Tit 2:11-12. And hereby is God greatly glorified in the world.

**3.** They are meet for God, and tend unto his glory, in that they express and manifest the *efficacy of the mediation of the Lord Christ,* in the obedience of his life and the sacrifice of his death. These he aimed at in them, Tit 2:14; Eph 5:25-27. It is in Jesus Christ that God will be glorified. And this is manifested in the effects of his wisdom and love in his mediation. For hereby do we declare and show forth τὰς ἀρετάς, the *“virtues* of him who hath called us,” 1Pe 2:9; or the efficacious power of the mediation of Christ, which these fruits are the effects and products of. We do not only declare the excellency and holiness of his doctrine, which teacheth these things, but also the power and efficacy of his blood and intercession, which procure them for us and work them in us. God is glorified hereby, in that some return is made unto his goodness and love. That a creature should make any return unto God, answerable or proportionable unto the effects of his goodness, love, and bounty towards it, is utterly impossible. And yet this men ought to take care about and satisfy, before they talk of a further merit. For what can we properly merit at his hands, whose precedent bounty we come infinitely short of answering or satisfying in all that we can do? But this of fruitfulness in obedience is the way which God hath appointed, whereby we may testify our sense of divine love and goodness, and express our gratitude. And hereby do our fruits of righteousness redound unto the glory of God.

**4.** God in and by them doth extend his care, goodness, and love unto others. It is his will and pleasure that many who long unto himself in an especial way, and others also among the community of mankind, should sometimes be cast into, and, it may be, always be in a condition of wants and straits in this world. To take care of them, to provide for them, to relieve them, so as they also may have an especial sense of his goodness, and be instrumental in setting forth his praise, is incumbent on Him who is the great provider for all. Now, one signal way whereby he will do this, is by the fruits of obedience brought forth in others. Their charity, their compassion, their love, their bounty, shall help and relieve them that are in wants, straits, sorrows, poverty, imprisonment, exile, or the like. And so it is in all other cases. Their meekness, their patience, their forbearance, which are of these fruits, shall be useful unto others, under their weaknesses and temptations. Their zeal, their labor of love in teaching and instructing, or preaching the word, shall be the means of the conviction and conversion of others. So doth it please God, by these fruits of obedience in some, to communicate of his own goodness and love, unto the help, relief, succor, and redress of others. For those so relieved do, or at least ought to look on all as coming directly from God. For it is he who not only commands those who are the means of their conveyance unto them to do what they do, but he directly works it in them by his grace, without which it would not be. And all this redoundeth unto the glory of God. This our apostle expresseth at large, 2Co 9:12-15 : “For the administration of this service” (that is, the charitable and bountiful contribution of the Corinthians unto the poor of the church of Jerusalem) “not only supplieth the wants of the saints” themselves (the thought whereof might give great satisfaction to the minds of men benign and compassionate, namely, that they have been able to relieve others), “but is abundant also by many thanksgivings unto God.” ‘It hath this effect upon the minds of all that are concerned in it, or do know of it, to cause them to abound in thanks and praise unto God.’And he showeth both the grounds whereon and the way whereby this praise is so returned unto God. For, —

**(1.)** They consider not merely *what is done,* but the principle from whence it doth proceed: “Whilst by the experiment of this ministration they glorify God for your professed subjection unto the gospel.” This, in the first place, affects them greatly, that whereas before they had only heard it may be a report, that you, or some of you, were converted unto the faith of the gospel, they have now, by “this ministration,” — that is, the relief of bounty communicated unto them, — such an evidence and assurance, that with one consent they give praise and glory to God for the work of his grace towards you.’And, indeed, this usually is the first thing which affects the minds of any of the saints of God, in any relief that God is pleased to hand out unto them by the means of others. They admire and bless God in and for his grace towards them, by whose kindness and compassion they are relieved. So is God glorified by these fruits.

**(2.)** And the second ground of their praises was, the *liberal distribution* unto themselves, as they found by experience; and unto “all men,” as they were informed and believed. The ministration itself testified their faith and obedience unto the gospel; but the nature of it, that it was liberal and bountiful, evidenced the sincerity and fruitfulness of their faith, or “the exceeding grace of God in them,” Heb 6:14. They saw hereby that there was not an ordinary or common work only of grace on these Corinthians, engaging them into a common profession, and the duties of it, — which yet was a matter of great thankfulness unto God; but that indeed the grace of God exceedingly abounded in them, which produced these fruits of it in so plentiful a manner. And with respect hereunto also was praise peculiarly rendered unto God. Hereunto also the apostle adds a double way whereby God was glorified, distinct from the direct attribution of praises unto him.’ “And by their prayer for you, which long after you, for the exceeding grace of God in you.” That is, by both. these ways they glorified God, both in their prayers for a supply of divine grace and bounty to them by whom they were relieved, and in their inflamed love towards them and longing after them, which was occasioned only by their relief; but the real cause, motive, and object of it, was “the exceeding grace of God in them,” which was evidenced thereby. And by both these duties God is greatly glorified. Hence the apostle concludes the whole with that ἐπινίκιον of triumphant praise to God, “Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift.” ‘This,’saith he, ‘is a gift that cannot be sufficiently declared amongst men, and therefore God is more to be admired in it.’And the apostle presseth the occasion of their joint thankfulness in a word that may include both the grace of God given unto the Corinthians, enabling them to their duty, and the fruit of that grace in the bounty conferred on the poor saints; both of them were the gift of God, and in both of them was he glorified. And in this regard especially are the fruits of our obedience unto the gospel meet for Him by whom we are dressed; that is, have an *especial* tendency unto the glory of God. Hence is that caution of the apostle, Heb 13:16 : “But to do good and to communicate, forget not; for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.” Our prayers and praises also, as he declares in the verse foregoing, are “sacrifices unto God,” and accepted with him, verse 15. Our whole obedience is “our reasonable service,” is a sacrifice acceptable unto God, Rom 12:1; yea, but in these fruits of benignity, bounty, charity, doing good, and communicating largely and liberally, God is in a peculiar manner well pleased and satisfied, as smelling a savor of rest through Christ in such sacrifices.

And I might here justly take occasion at large to press men unto an abundant fruitfulness in this especial kind of fruit-bearing, but that the nature of our discourse will not admit it.

**5.** They are meet for God, because they are as the *first-fruits* unto him from the creation. When God took and rescued the land of Canaan, which he made his own in a peculiar manner, out of the hands of his adversaries, and gave it unto his own people to possess and inherit, he required of them, that, on their first entrance there-into, they should come and present him with the “first of all the fruits of the earth,” as an acknowledgment of his right to the land, and his bounty unto them, Deu 26:1-8, etc. The whole creation did by sin as it were go out of the possession of God; — not of his *right and power,* but of his love and favor: Satan became the “god of this world,” and the whole of it lay under the power of evil. By Jesus Christ he rescueth it again from its slavery and bondage unto Satan. But this he will not do all at once, only he will have some first-fruits offered unto him as an acknowledgment of his right, and as a pledge of his entering on the possession of the whole. And God is greatly glorified in the presenting of these first-fruits, at the recovery of the creation unto himself, which is a certain pledge of vindicating the whole from its present bondage. And it is believers that are these first-fruits unto God: Jas 1:18, “Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures.” But we are not so but in our fruitfulness. Thereby it is that there is a revenue of glory and praise returned unto God from this lower part of the creation; without which it bears nothing but thorns and briers in his sight. In these, therefore, and the like things, consists the meetness of our fruits of obedience unto God, or his glory. Again, —

**Obs. 9.** Wherever there are any sincere fruits of faith and obedience found in the hearts and lives of professors, God graciously accepts and blesseth them.

Nothing is so small but that, if it be sincere, he will accept; and nothing so great but he hath an overflowing reward for it. Nothing shall be lost that is done for God; — a cup of cold water, the least refreshment given unto any for his sake, shall be had in remembrance. All we have and are is antecedently due to him, so as that there can be no merit in any thing we do; but we must take heed lest, whilst we deny the *pride of merit,* we lose the *comfort of faith* as to acceptance of our duties. It is the fruit of the mediation of Jesus Christ, that we may “serve God without fear, in righteousness and holiness all our days;” but if we are always anxious and solicitous about what we do, whether it be accepted with God or no, how do we serve him without fear? This is the worst kind of fear we are obnoxious unto, most dishonorable unto God and discouraging unto our own souls, 1Jn 4:18. For how can we dishonor God more than by judging that when we do our utmost in sincerity in the way of his service, yet he is not well pleased with us, nor doth accept of our obedience? Is not this to suppose him severe, angry, always displeased, ready to take advantage, one whom nothing will satisfy? Such thoughts are the marks of the wicked servant in the parable, Luk 19:20-22. Where, then, is that infinite goodness, grace, condescension, love, compassion, which are so essential to his nature, and which he hath declared himself so to abound in? And if it be so, what use is there of the mediation and intercession of Jesus Christ? what benefit in the promises of the covenant? and what is there remaining that can encourage us in and unto duties of obedience? Merely to perform them because we cannot, we dare not do otherwise, a servile compliance with our conviction, is neither acceptable unto God nor any ways comfortable unto our own souls. Who would willingly lead such a life in this world, to be always laboring and endeavoring, without the least satisfaction that what he does will either please them by whom he is set on work, or any way turn to his own account? Yet such a life do men lead who are not persuaded that God graciously accepts of what they sincerely perform. A suspicion to the contrary riseth up in opposition unto the fundamental principle of all religion: “He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him,” Heb 11:6.

This is the first principle and foundation of all religious worship; which if it be not well and firmly laid in our hearts, all our supplication will be in vain. Blow unless we do believe that he doth accept and bless our duties, we cannot believe that he is such a rewarder, or, as he expressed it in the covenant with Abraham, an “exceeding great reward.” But he hath descended to the lowest instances, of a little *goat’s hair* to the tabernacle, a *mite* into the treasury, a *cup of water* to a disciple, to assure us that he despiseth not the meanest of our sincere services*.* But this must be spoken unto again on verse 10, and therefore I shall not here further confirm it.

Some perhaps will say, ‘that their best fruits are so corrupted, their best duties so defiled, that they cannot see how they can find acceptance with so holy a God. Every thing that proceeds from them is so weak and infirm, that they fear they shall suffer loss in all.’And this very apprehension deprives them of all that consolation in the Lord which they might take in a course of holy obedience. I answer,

**1.** This consideration, of the defilements of sin that adhere to the best of our works or duties, excludes all *merit* whatever. And it is right it should do so; for indeed that cursed notion of the merit of good works hath been the most pernicious engine for the ruin of men’s souls that ever Satan made use of. For on the one hand many have been so swollen and puffed up with it, as that they would not deign in any thing to be beholden to the grace of God, but have thought heaven and glory as due to them for their works as hell is to other men for their sin, or the wages of a hireling to him for his labor, which cries to heaven against the injustice of them that detain it. Hence a total neglect of Christ hath ensued. Others, convinced of the pride and folly of this presumption, and notwithstanding the encouragement unto fruitful obedience which lies in God’s gracious acceptation and rewarding of our duties, have been discouraged in their attendance unto them. It is well, therefore, where this notion is utterly discarded by the consideration of the sinful imperfection of our best duties: so it is done by the church, Isa 64:6; Rom 7:21.

**2.** This consideration excludes all hope or *expectation of acceptance ,with God upon the account of strict justice.* If we consider God only as a judge pronouncing sentence concerning us and our duties according to the law, neither we nor any thing we do can either be accepted with him or approved by him. For as the psalmist says concerning our persons, “If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand ?” and prays, “Enter not into judgment with thy servant, for in thy sight shall no man living be justified:*”* so it is with respect unto all our works and duties of obedience; not any one of them can endure the trial of God as judging by the law, but would appear as a filthy thing. Whilst, therefore, persons are only under the power of their convictions, and are not able by faith to take another view of God and his dealings with them but by the law, it is impossible that they should have any comfortable expectation of the approbation of their obedience.

Wherefore, that we may be persuaded of the gracious acceptation of all our duties, even the least and meanest that we do in sincerity and with a single eye to the glory of God, and that our labor in the Lord should not be lost, we are always to have two things in the eye and view of our faith:

**1.** The *tenor of the covenant* wherein we walk with God. God hath abolished and taken away the covenant of works by substituting a new one in the room thereof. And the reason why he did so, was because of a double insufficiency in the law of that covenant unto his great end of glorifying himself in the salvation of sinners. For,

**(1.)** It could not *expiate and take away sin;* which must be done indispensably, or that end could not be obtained. This our apostle asserts as one reason of it, Rom 8:3; and proves at large in this epistle afterwards.

**(2.)** Because it *neither did nor could approve of such an obedience* as poor sanctified sinners were able to yield unto God; for it required *perfection,* when the best which they can attain unto in this life is but *sincerity.* What then? do we make void the law by faith? doth not God require perfect righteousness of us, — the righteousness which the law originally prescribed? Yes, he doth so; and without it the curse of the law will come upon all men whatever: but this also being that which in ourselves we can never attain unto, is provided for in the new covenant by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ unto them that do believe. So the apostle expressly states the matter, Rom 10:3-6. On this supposition, God in this covenant hath provided for the acceptance of sincere though imperfect obedience, which the law had no respect unto. The sum is, that his acceptance now shall be suited unto the operation of his grace. He will crown and reward all the actings of his own grace in us. Whatever duty; therefore, is principled by grace and done in sincerity, is accepted with God, according to the tenor of this covenant. This, therefore, we are always to eye and consider as the bottom of the acceptance of our imperfect, weak, unworthy services.

**2.** Unto the same end is the mediation of Christ to be considered in an especial manner. Without respect unto him, neither we nor any thing we do is approved of God. And a double regard is in this matter always to be had unto him and his mediation: —

**(1.)** That by one sacrifice he takes away all that is evil or sinful in our duties; whatever is of real defilement, disorder, self in them, whereby any guilt might be contracted, or is so, he hath borne it and taken it, as unto its legal guilt, all away. Whatever, therefore, of guilt doth unavoidably adhere unto or accompany our duties, we may by faith look upon it as so removed out of the way by the sacrifice and mediation of Christ, as that it shall be no hinderance or obstruction to the gracious acceptation of them.

**(2.)** Whereas all. that we do, when we have used our utmost endeavors, by the assistance of grace, and setting aside the consideration of what is evil and sinful from the principle of corrupted nature remaining in us, is yet so weak and imperfect, and will be so whilst we are but dust and ashes dwelling in tabernacles of clay, as that we cannot apprehend how the goodness which is in our obedience should extend itself to God, reach unto the throne of his holiness, or be regarded by him, the merit of our Lord Jesus Christ doth so make way for them, put such a value on them in the sight of God, as that they receive approbation and blessing from him; for in Jesus Christ we are complete, and God makes both us and our duties accepted in the Beloved. The consideration hereof, added to the former, may firmly assure the mind and conscience of every true believer concerning the gracious acceptation of the least of their holy duties that are performed in sincerity. And this they have in such a way as,

**(1.)** To *exclude merit* and boasting;

**(2.)** To *keep them in a holy admiration* of God’s grace and condescension;

**(3.)** To make them continually *thankful for* Christ and his mediation;

**(4.)** To yield unto themselves comfort in their duties and encouragement unto them.

**Heb 6:8.** — “But that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned.”

In the foregoing verse the apostle showed how it would be and fall out with that part of the Judaical church which embraced the gospel, and brought forth the fruits of faith and obedience. God would accept of them, own them, preserve and bless them. And this blessing of God consisted in four things:

**1.** In his *gracious acceptance* of them in Christ, and the approbation of their obedience, verse 10.

**2.** In *delivering them from that dreadful curse* and judgment which not long after consumed the whole remainder of that people.

**3.** In *making use* of multitudes of them to be the means of communicating the knowledge and grace of the gospel unto other persons and nations; —

a greater blessing and honor than which they could not.. in this world be made partakers of.

**4.** In their *eternal salvation.* This being laid. down, he proceeds in his parable to declare the state and condition of the other sort of them, namely, of unbelievers, apostates from, and opposers of the gospel. And this he doth in compliance with the symbolical action of our Savior in cursing the barren fig-tree, whereby the same thing was represented, Mat 21:19; for it was the apostate, persecuting, unbelieving church of the Jews, their estate, and what would become of them, which our Savior intended to expose in that fig-tree. He had now almost finished his ministry among them, and seeing they brought forth no fruit thereon, he intimates that the curse was coming on them, whose principal effect would be perpetual barrenness. They *would not* before bear any fruit, and they *shall not* hereafter; being hardened, by the just judgment of God, unto their everlasting ruin. So was fulfilled what was long before foretold, Isa 6:9-10, as our apostle declares, Act 28:26-27. In answer hereunto, our apostle in this verse gives this account of their barrenness, and description of their end, through God’s cursing and destroying of them. And herein also the estate and condition of all apostates, unfruitful professors, hypocrites, and unbelievers, to whom the gospel hath been dispensed, is declared and expressed.

And, as it was necessary unto his design, the apostle pursues his former similitude, making an application of it unto this sort of men. And,

**1.** He supposeth them to be “earth,” as the other sort are, — ἐκφέρουσα; that is, ἡ γὴ ἡ ἐκφέρουσα, “that earth,” that part of the earth. So it is, and no more. It is neither better nor worse than that which proves fruitful and is blessed. All men to whom the gospel is preached are every way by nature in the same state and condition. All the difference between them is made by the gospel itself. None of them have any reason to boast, nor do they in any thing make themselves differ from others.

**2.** It is supposed that the rain falls often on this ground also. Those who live unprofitably under the means of grace have ofttimes the preaching of the word as plentifully, and as long continued unto them, as they that are most thriving and fruitful in obedience. And herein lies no small evidence that these things will be called over again another day, to the glory of God’s grace and righteousness. On these suppositions, two things are considerable in what is ascribed unto this earth:

**1.** What it brings forth;

**2.** How.

**1.** It bringeth forth ἀκάνθας, “thorns and briers.” See the opening of the words before. In general, I doubt not but *all sorts of sins* are hereby intended, all “unfruitful works of darkness,” Rom 6:21, Eph 5:2. And the principal reason why they are here compared unto thorns and briers, is with respect unto the curse that came on the earth by sin: “Cursed is the ground, ...... thorns and thistles shall it bring forth unto thee,” Gen 2:17-18; whereunto barrenness, or unaptness for better fruits, is added, Gen 4:12. From this curse, the earth of itself, and untilled, would bring forth nothing but; thorns and briers, at least they would be absolutely prevalent in and over all the products of it; so the heart of man by nature is wholly overrun with evil, sinful imaginations, and his life with vicious, sinful actions, Gen 6:5, Rom 2:10-18. Wherefore the bringing forth of thorns and briers, is abounding in such actings and works as proceed from the principle of corrupted nature under the curse. In opposition hereunto, all good actions, all acts of faith and obedience, are called “herbs” and “fruit,” because they are “the fruits of the Spirit;” and such sinful works are compared to, and called “thorns and briers,” from a community of properties with them. For,

**(1.)** They are in their kind unprofitable, things of no use, but meet to be cast out, that room may be made for better. When a man hath a field overgrown with thorns and briers, he finds he hath no benefit by them; wherefore he resolves to dig them up or burn them. Of such and no other use are the sins of men in the world. All the “works of darkness” are “unfruitful,” Eph 5:2. The world is no way benefited by them never was any man the better for his own or another man’s sins.

**(2.)** Because they are hurtful and noxious, choking and hindering good fruits that wise would thrive in the field. So are thorns and briers represented in the Scripture as grieving, piercing, and hurtful; and things that are so called by their name, Eze 28:24; Mic 7:4; Isa 7:25. Such are all the sins of men. All the confusion, disorders, devastations that are in the world, are from them alone. In general, therefore, it is all sorts of sins, “works of darkness,” “works of the flesh,” that are intended by these “thorns and brier,” But yet I presume that the apostle hath regard unto the sins which the obstinate Jews were then in an especial manner guilty of, and which would be the cause of their sudden destruction. Brow those, as it appeareth from this whole epistle and matter of fact in the story, were unbelief, impenitency, and apostasy. The thorns and briers, which were the fuel wherein was kindled the fire of God’s indignation unto their consumption, were their sins against the gospel. Either they would not give their assent unto its truth, or would not amend their lives according to its doctrine, or would not abide with constancy in its profession. These are the especial sins which cast those Hebrews, and will cast all that are like unto them, into the condition of danger and perdition, here described*.*

**2.** The manner of bringing forth these thorns and briers is expressed by; ἐκφέρουσα*.* Chrysostom puts a great mark upon the difference of the words used by the apostle. That which he applieth to the production of good fruits is which denotes a *natural conception* and production of any thing in due order, time, and season; but this ἐκφέρουσα, applied to the barren, cursed ground, denotes a casting of them *out in abundance,* not only without the use of means, but against it. The heart of man needs not to be impregnated with any adventitious seed, to make it thrust forth all sorts of sins, or to make it fruitful in unbelief and impenitency: the womb of sin will of its own accord be continually teeming with these things.

Matters being thus stated with this ground, the apostle affirms three things concerning it: —

**1.** It is ἀδόκιμος. That is said to be ἀδόκιμον, whereof trial hath been made whether, by the application of suitable means unto it, it will be made useful unto any certain end. Δοκιμάζω is “to try,” to make an experiment what any thing is, and of what use; especially it is applied to the trial that is made of gold and silver by fire. Τό χρυσίον ἐν πυρὶ δοκιμάζομεν*,* Isocrat.; “We try gold in the fire,” — that is, whether it be true and pure. Fire is the great trier and discoverer of metals, of what sort they are, Corinthians 2:13-15. And hence the Lord Christ, in the trial of his church, is compared to a refiner with fire, Mal 3:2. So faith is tried, 1Pe 1:7. And it is the word which our apostle useth when he enjoins us to try and search ourselves as unto our sincerity in faith and obedience, 2Co 13:5, Gal 6:4; — as also to make a due inquiry into the true nature of spiritual things, Rom 12:2, Eph 5:10; not contenting ourselves with a bare notion of them, but endeavoring after an experience of their power in our own hearts. Δοκιμή is often used by our apostle for “an experience upon trial,” Rom 5:4; 2Co 2:9; Php 2:22 : as δοκίμιον by Peter, 1 Epistles 1:7. Hence is δόκιμος, “one that upon trial is approved, found sound, and therefore, is accepted,” 1Co 11:19; 2Co 10:18; 2Ti 2:15; Jas 1:12. Εὐάρεστος τῷ Θεῷ, καὶ δόκιμος τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, Rom 14:18; — “Accepted with God, and approved with men.” Hence ἀδόκιμος is “one rejected, disapproved upon trial, reprobate,” 1Co 9:27; 2Co 13:5-6; Tit 1:16. The whole is expressed, Jer 6:29-30 : “The bellows are burnt, the lead is consumed of the fire; the founder melteth in vain ....... Reprobate silver shall men call them, because the LORD hath rejected them.” All means were used to try to the utmost whether there were any true, sincere metal in them. After all, they were found ἀργύριον, “refuse silver,” mere dross; which was therefore rejected, as of no use. This ground, therefore, is supposed to have had a trial made of it, and all proper means to have been used for to make it fruitful; but whereas nothing succeeded, it is to be ἀδόκιμος*,* “rejected,” “disapproved,” laid aside as to any further endeavors to make it successful. Such a piece of ground the husbandman leaves caring for; he will lay out no more charges about it nor take any more pains with it, for he finds on trial that it is incurable.

**2.** It is said to be κατάρας ἐγγύς*,* “nigh unto a curse.” The husbandman doth not presently destroy such a piece of ground, but neglecting of it, lets it lie, further to discover its own barrenness and unprofitableness. But this he doth so as to declare his resolution to lay it waste, and so to cast it out of the bounds of his possession. And he doth it in three ways: —

**(1.)** *By gathering out of it all the good plants and herbs* that yet remain in it, and transplanting them into a better soil.

**(2.)** By *casting down its fences* and laying it waste, that all the beasts of the field shall lodge in it and prey upon it.

**(3.)** By *withholding all means of doing it good,* by watering or manuring of it. And hereby it becomes like to the barren wilderness as it lies under the curse, which no man careth for. It is nigh to that condition wherein it shall not be known that it was ever owned by him, or did ever belong unto his possession. So is it unto cursing. For as blessing of any thing is an addition of good, so cursing implies the taking off all kindness and all effects thereof, and therewithal the devoting of it unto destruction.

**3.** Lastly, It is added, ἧς τὸ τέλος εἰς καῦσιν, “whose end is unto burning,” or “to be turned.” Fire makes a total and dreadful destruction of all combustible things whereunto it is applied. Hence such desolations are said to be firing or burning, by what means soever they are effected. Things are consumed, as if they were burned up with fire. There is a burning of ground which is used to make it fruitful, as the poet expresseth it in his Georgics, lib. 1:84: —

***“Saepe etiam steriles incendere profuit agros,***

***Atque levem stipulam crepitantibus urere flammis.”***

But it is a burning of another kind that is here intended. And this is an act of positive indignation. He will not only show his dissatisfaction in such barren ground by a neglect of it, but his vengeance in its destruction. And it is thus expressed, to intimate both the *temporal destruction of the* *obstinate Jews,* and *the eternal destruction of all unbelievers,* — both by fire of several kinds.

Thus, therefore, the apostle declares that God, the great husbandman and owner of the vineyard, would deal with the impenitent and incredulous Hebrews.

**1.** He *tried* them, and that for a long season, by the preaching of the gospel. The rain fell oft upon them, and that for .the space now of thirty- six years, or thereabouts. God did, as it were, essay by outward means to make them fruitful, to bring them to faith, repentance, and obedience. But after this long trial, it appeared that they multiplied, as it *were,* under his hand the thorns and briers of their unbelief, and all sorts of provoking sins.

Wherefore God rejects them, declares that his soul had no pleasure in them, — that he would be at no further cost about them. And twice did our apostle mind his countrymen in other places that God would speedily so deal with them, Act 13:40-41; Act 13:46, Act 28:25-28; as our Savior had often threatened them that the kingdom of God should be taken from them, — they should no longer enjoy the means of saving knowledge or repentance. God laid them aside, as a field no longer fit to be tilled. And this he did about the [time of the] writing of this epistle; for immediately hereon he began utterly to forsake them who were obstinate in their Judaism, and all those who apostatized thereunto from Christianity. And thus also, in proportion, he deals with all other unprofitable hearers and apostates. There is a time after which he casts them out of his care, will feed them no more, provide no more that they be rained on or dressed. And if they do any more enjoy the word, it is by accident, for the sake of some who are approved; but they shall receive no advantage by it, seeing they are no longer “God’s husbandry.”

**2.** On this rejection of them, they were “nigh unto cursing;” that is, they were so ordered and disposed of as that the destroying curse of God might come upon them. God had now anathematized them, or devoted them to destruction; and hereupon he gave them up unto all those ways and means whereby it might be hastened and infallibly overtake them. For,

**(1.)** He *gathered all the good plants from amongst them;* he called out and separated from them all true believers, and planted them in the Christian church. So he deals with all apostate churches before their utter destruction, Rev 18:4.

**(2.)** He *took away their fences,* casting there out of his protection, insomuch that when they were destroyed, the general of the Roman army acknowledged that God had infatuated them, so that their impregnable holds and forts were of no use unto them.

**(3.)** He *granted them no more use of means for their conversion.* Thenceforward they fell into all manner of sins, confusions, disorders, tumults; which occasioned their ruin. After the same manner will God deal with any other people whom he rejects for their rejection of the gospel. And the world hath no small reason to tremble at the apprehension of such a condition at this day.

**3.** In the end, this *whole barren earth was burned up.* In the first place, this respects the destruction of Jerusalem, which ensued not long after, when temple and city, and people and country, were all devoured by fire and sword, Mat 24:1-2. But yet this, like the destruction of Sodom, was but an emblem of the future judgment. Hypocrites, unbelievers, apostates, are to have another end than what they fall into in this world. An end they shall have wherein their eternal condition shall be immutably stated. And this end that they must have is to the fire, the “fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” They shall be gathered together and burned with a fire that shall never be quenched, Joh 15:6. And this final destruction of all unprofitable hearers, unbelievers, and apostates, is that which is principally intended in the words. And we must not let this wholesome admonition pass without some observations from it.

**Obs. 1.** Whilst the gospel is preached unto men, they are under their great trial for eternity.

The application that is made unto them is for an experiment how they will prove. If they acquit themselves in faith and obedience, they receive the blessing of eternal life from God. If they prove barren and unprofitable, they are rejected of God, and cursed by him. Nor shall they ever have any other trial, nor shall ever any other experiment be made of them, Hebrews 10. Their season of the enjoyment of the gospel is their “day.” When that is past, “the night cometh” on them, wherein they cannot work. When these “bellows are burned, and the lead is consumed, the founder melting in vain,” men are rejected as “reprobate silver,”’never to be tried any more. Men do but deceive themselves in their reserve of a purgatory when they are gone out of this world. If they are cast under their trial here, so they must abide to eternity. And we may do well to consider these things distinctly, because our concernment in them is very great. To this purpose observe, —

**1.** That we are all made for an eternal state and condition, in blessedness or woe. Men may live like beasts, and therefore wish that they might die like them also; but we are all made with another design, and must all of us “stand in our” eternal “lot at the end of the days,” Dan 12:13.

**2.** That the unchangeable determination of our eternal state depends on what we do in this life. There is neither wisdom nor knowledge, duty nor obedience, in the grave, whither we are going. As the tree falls so it must lie. “It is appointed unto men once to die, and after that is the judgment.” Nothing interposeth to alter our state and condition between death and judgment. The contrivance of purgatory when we are gone hence was an invention of Satan, to delude the souls of men with hopes of relief, when all means and ways of it were past and irrecoverable.

**3.** The trial of our future state is made by the preaching of the gospel unto us, and our compliance with it or rejection of it. This is that which the text declares on the one hand and the other; the barren ground is rejected on this trial.

**4.** It was a fruit of infinite grace, condescension, and mercy, to grant a new trial unto sinners under the curse we had all cast ourselves into. There God might have left us. So he dealt with the sinning angels, whom he spared not. And had he dealt so with all mankind, who could say unto him, “What doest thou?” And it is that which we must all answer for, namely, that when we were lost and fallen under the sentence of the holy and righteous law, God would propose any terms of peace and reconciliation unto us, and give us a second trial thereon.

**5.** That the especial way of this trial doth most eminently set out this grace and mercy. A way it is full of infinite wisdom, goodness, love, mercy, and grace; such as wherein all the divine perfections will be eternally glorified, whether it be accepted or refused.

**6.** When the gospel is preached unto any, God telleth sinners that although they have destroyed themselves, and are ready every moment to sink into eternal misery, yet he will, out of infinite grace and compassion, try them once more, and that by the holy terms of the gospel. And in the preaching of the word he doth it accordingly. And although the season of this trial be determined with God, yet it is unto us uncertain, on many accounts. For,

**(1.)** The *continuance of our lives,* during which alone we are capable of enjoying it, is so.

**(2.)** We see that the *preaching of the gospel* is so also. The Lord Christ doth ofttimes remove the candlestick whilst they continue alive in the world among whom it was once fixed. And,

**(3.)** There is a time when a period is put unto the *efficacy* of the word for the conversion of some, although the outward dispensation be continued unto them, Isa 6:9-10. Wherefore the present season and present enjoyment of the gospel it is our duty to consider and improve. For what is the work that therein God hath in hand towards us? Is it not to give us our trial, in the use of means, as to what shall be our future condition? He hath therein undertaken us as his vineyard, as his husbandry, and causeth the rain to fall upon us; and hath done so often and long. And who almost doth consider aright how great his concernment is herein? Would men be so careless, negligent, formal, slothful, as they are for the most part under the hearing of the word, if they duly remembered that it is their *trial for eternity?* and they know not how soon it may be over. If we lose this season, we are gone for ever. It is, therefore, our wisdom to know whether our fruitfulness, in faith, repentance, and obedience, do answer the rain and dressing we have had by the dispensation of the word. The axe is laid at the root of the tree; — if we bring not forth good fruit we shall ere long be hewed down and cast into the fire. It is true, there is none of us do answer as we ought the love and care of God towards us herein; nor can we so do. When we have done our utmost, we are but unprofitable servants. But there is a wide difference between a defect in degrees of obedience, and the neglect of the whole. Where the first is, we ought to walk humbly in the sense of it, and labor after more perfection. And if this defect be great and notable, such as is occasioned by our lusts indulged unto, or by sloth and negligence, as we can have no evidence of our being approved of God, so it is high time to recover ourselves, by new diligence and holy endeavors, or we may be cast in our trial. But where the latter is, where men bring forth no “fruit meet for repentance,” what can they expect but to be finally and totally rejected of God? Whereas, therefore, we have been long most of us under this trial, it is assuredly high time that we call ourselves unto a strict account with respect unto it. And if, upon inquiry, we find ourselves at a loss which sort of ground we do belong unto, because of our barrenness and leanness, unless we are hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, we will give ourselves no rest until we have better evidences of our fruit- bearing. We may do well to remember, that though the earth on which the rain falls is here distributed by the apostle into two sorts, like Jeremiah’s figs, *very good* and *very bad,* to one of which every one at last must be joined; yet, as to present effects and appearances, the ground whereinto the seed of the gospel is cast is distributed by our Savior into four sorts, whereof one only brings forth fruit meet for Him by whom it is dressed, Matthew 13. There are several ways whereby we may miscarry under our trial; *one only* whereby we may be accepted, namely, fruitfulness of heart and life.

**Obs. 2.** Barrenness under the dispensation of the gospel is always accompanied with an increase of sin.

The ground which brings not forth “herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed,” thrusts forth “thorns and briers.” Let it be observed, that spiritual barrenness never goes alone. Abounding in sin will accompany it, and doth so. It may be it doth not so openly and visibly for a season; but all things will tend thereunto, and at last it will discover itself. Yea, there are no sinners like them, nor sin like theirs, by whom the means of grace are rejected, or not improved. The first generation of great provoking sinners were those of the *old world* before the flood. Unto these Noah had been a “preacher of righteousness,” 2Pe 2:5. In his ministry did the Spirit of Christ “strive with them,” until God affirmed he should do so no more, Gen 6:3. But they were disobedient and barren; 1Pe 3:19-20. And this issued in those provoking sins which God could not bear withal, but “brought the flood upon the world of the ungodly.” The next was these *Hebrews,* unto whom the gospel had been preached. And they proved a generation no less wicked than that before the flood, insomuch as their own historian affirms that he verily believed that “if the Romans had not come and destroyed them, God would have poured fire and brimstone on them from heaven, as he did upon Sodom.” And the third generation of the same kind are the *apostate Christian churches,* whose condition and state is described in the Revelation. This is the issue of barrenness under God’s culture and watering; and it will be so. For, —

**1.** When men have rejected the last means of their spiritual healing and restraint of sin, what can be expected from them but an outrage in sinning? There are three ways whereby God puts a restraint upon sin. The first is by the *light of a natural conscience.* This is born with men in the principle of it, and grows into exercise in the improvement of reason. And where the natural workings of it are not prevented and suffocated by the horrible example of parents and relations living in cursing, lying, and all manner of profaneness, it is very useful in youth, to restrain persons from sundry sins. It is so, I say, until corruptions getting strength, and temptations abounding, custom in sinning takes away the edge of it, and weakens it in its operation. Wherefore, —

**2.** When this restraint is broken through, God sets up the hedge of the law before the minds of men, to deter them from sin. And this also hath a great efficacy with many unto this end, at least for a season. But neither will mere conviction from the law always give bounds unto the lusts of men. Wherefore, —

**3.** The *gospel* comes with a different design from them both. The utmost of their aim and work is but to restrain sin, but the gospel comes to convert the sinner. Their work is to set a dam before the streams of sin; that of the gospel is to dry up the spring.

But if this also, as it is in this case, be rejected and despised, what remains to set any bounds unto the lusts of men?

**1.** They will find themselves at liberty to act their own inclinations to the utmost, as having cast off all regard to God in all the ways whereby he hath revealed himself. Hence you may find more honesty and uprightness, a more conscientious abstinence from sin, wrongs, and injuries, more effects of moral virtue, among heathens and Mohammedans, than among professed Christians, or persons who, being unprofitable under the gospel, do thereby tacitly reject it. No fields in the world are fuller of thorns and briers, than those of people, nations, churches, who profess themselves to be Christians and are not. Suppose two fields equally barren; let one of them be tilled and dressed, and the other be let alone, left unto its own state and condition: when the field that hath been tilled shall be forsaken for its barrenness, trash of all sorts, incomparably above that which was never tilled, will rise up in it. This is that which at this day is such a scandal to Christianity, which hath broken up the flood-gates of atheism and let in a deluge of profaneness on the world. No *sinners like unto barren Christians.* Heathens would blush, and infidels stand astonished, at the things they practice in the light of the sun. There was sleeping in the bed of uncleanness, and drunkenness, among the heathens: but our apostle, who well enough knew their course, affirms of them, that “they who sleep, sleep in the night; and they who are drunken, are drunken in the night,” 1Th 5:7. They did their shameful things in darkness and in secret, Eph 5:11-12. But, alas! among Christians who have directly and willfully despised the healing power and virtue of the gospel, these are works of the day, proclaimed as in Sodom, and the perpetration of them is the business of men’s lives. If you would see the greatest representation of hell upon the earth, go into an apostate church, or to persons that have had the word preached unto them, or have heard of it sufficiently for their conviction, but are not healed. The face of all things in Christianity at this day is on this account dreadful and terrible, and bespeaks desolation to lie at the door. The ground whereunto the waters of the sanctuary do come, and it is not healed, is left unto salt and barrenness for ever.

**2.** It is a righteous thing with God *judicially* to give up such persons unto all manner of filthy sins and wickedness, that it may be an aggravation of their condemnation at the last day. It is the way of God to do so even when inferior manifestations of himself, his word and will, are rejected, or not improved. So he dealt with the Gentiles for their abuse of the light of nature, with the revelation made of him by the works of creation and providence, Rom 1:24; Rom 1:26; Rom 1:28. And shall not we think that he will, that he doth so deal with persons, upon their unprofitableness under and rejection of the highest and most glorious revelation of himself that ever he did make, or ever will in this world, unto any of the sons of men? It may be asked, ‘How doth God thus judicially give up persons despising the gospel unto their own hearts’lusts, to do the things that are not convenient?’I answer, He doth it,

**(1.)** By *leaving them wholly to themselves,* taking off all effectual restraint from them. So spake our blessed Savior of the Pharisees: “Let them alone,” saith he; “they are blind leaders of the blind,” Mat 15:14. ‘Reprove them not, help them not, hinder them not; let them alone to take their own course.’So saith God of Israel, now given up to sin and ruin, “Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone,” Hos 4:17; Eze 3:27. And it is the same judgment which he denounceth against unprofitable hearers of the gospel: Rev 22:11, “He which is unjust, let him be unjust still; and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still.” ‘Go on now in your sins and filthiness without restraint.’Now, when men are thus left unto themselves, — as there is a time when God will so leave gospel despisers, that he will lay no more restraint upon them, but withhold the influence of all consideration that should give them any effectual check or control, — it were not to be conceived what an outrage and excess of sin the cursed, corrupted nature of man will run out into, but that the world is filled with the fruits and tokens of it. And God doth righteously thus withdraw himself more absolutely from gospel despisers than he doth from pagans and infidels, whom, by various actings of his providence, he keeps within bounds of sinning subservient unto his holy ends.

**(2.)** God pours out upon such persons “a spirit of slumber,” or gives them up to a *profound security,* so as that they take notice of nothing in the works or word of God that should stir them up to amendment, or restrain them from sin. So he dealt with these unbelieving Jews: Rom 11:8, “God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see.” Although it be so come to pass, that many there are whom God’s soul loatheth, and they abhor him also, as he speaks, Zec 11:8, so that he will have no more to do with them; yet he doth and will continue his word in the world, and the works of his providence in the government thereof. Now, as in the word there are several warnings and dreadful threatenings against sinners, so in the works of God there are judgments full of evidences of God’s displeasure against sin, Rom 1:18. Both these in their own nature are suited to awaken men, to bring them to a due consideration of themselves, and so to restrain them from sin. But as to this sort of persons, God sends a spirit of slumber upon them, that nothing shall rouse them up, or awaken them from their sins. Though it thunders over their heads, and the tempest of judgments falls so near them, as if they were personally concerned, yet do they cry, “Peace, peace.” When the word is preached to them, or they hear by any means the curse of the law, yet they bless themselves, as those who are altogether unconcerned in it. God gives them up unto all ways and means whereby they may be fortified in their security. Love of sin; contempt and scorn of them by whom the word of God is declared, or the judgments of God are dreaded; carnal confidence, carrying towards atheism; the society of other presumptuous sinners, strengthening their hands in their abominations; a present supply for their lusts, in the pleasant things of this world, — I mean which are so to the flesh; shall all of them contribute to their security.

**(3.)** God absolutely and irrecoverably gives them up to *extreme obstinacy,* to final hardness and impenitency, Isa 6:9-10. This is no place to treat of the nature of divine induration. It is enough to observe at present, that where provoking sinners do fall under it, they are totally blinded and hardened in sin unto their eternal ruin. Now, when God doth thus deal with men who *will not,* and *because they will not* be healed and reformed by the preaching of the gospel, can any thing else ensue but that they will give up themselves unto all wickedness and filthiness with delight and greediness? And this wrath seems to be come upon multitudes in the world unto the utmost. So the apostle describes this condition in the Jews when they were under it, 1Th 2:15-16 : “Who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men: forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins alway: for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost.” And they are even blind themselves who see not this to be the condition of many in the world at this day.

**3.** There are especial sins that are peculiar to this sort of barren persons, and so also aggravations of sins that others contract not the guilt of. Now this state and condition, at least the utmost and highest danger of it, is so written on the foreheads of most that are called Christians in the world, that there is no need of making any application of it unto them. And although it be not for us to know times and seasons, or to set bounds and limits to the patience of Christ, yet have we just reason to dread the speedy breaking forth of his severity in judgment, spiritual or temporal, upon most nations and churches that are called by his name. But the duty it is of those who make profession of the gospel in a peculiar manner, to inquire diligently whether there be not growing in their own hearts and ways any such sins as are usually consequent unto barrenness under the word. If it prove so upon search, they may justly fear that God is beginning to revenge upon them the neglect of the gospel, and unprofitableness under it. There are degrees of this sin and its consequents, as we shall show afterwards; and the evidences and effects of God’s displeasure against it are progressive and gradual also. From some of these the sinner is recoverable by grace: from some of them he is not, at least *ordinarily,* but is inevitably bound over to the judgment of the great day. But the last degree is such as men ought to tremble at, who have the least care for or love unto their immortal souls. For whatever issue of things God may have provided in the purpose of his grace, the danger unto us is inexpressible. And there neither is nor can be unto any the least evidence, token, or hope, that God designs them any relief, whilst themselves are careless and negligent in the use of means for their own deliverance. It may, therefore, be inquired by what sort of sins this condition may be known in more strict professors than the common sort of Christians in the world, and how their barrenness under the gospel may be discovered thereby, as the cause by its effects and inseparable consequents. I shall, therefore, name some of those sins and ways with respect whereunto such persons ought to be exceeding jealous over themselves; as, —

**(1.)** An *indulgence unto some secret, pleasant, or profitable lust* or sin, with an allowance of themselves therein. That this may befall such persons, we have too open evidence in the frequent eruptions and discoveries of such evils in sundry of them. Some, through a long continuance in a course of the practice of private sins, are either surprised into such acts and works of it as are made public whether they will or no; or, being hardened in them, do turn off to their avowed practice. Some, under terrors of mind from God, fierce reflections of conscience, especially in great afflictions and probabilities of death, do voluntarily acknowledge the secret evils of their hearts and lives. And some, by strange and unexpected providences, God brings to light, discovering the hidden works of darkness wherein men have taken delight. Such things, therefore, there may be amongst them who make a more than ordinary profession in the world. For there are or may be hypocrites among them, — vessels in the house of God of wood and stone. And some who are sincere and upright may yet be long captivated under the power of their corruptions and temptations. And for the sake of such it is principally that this warning is designed. Take heed lest there be in any of you a growing secret lust or sin, wherein you indulge yourselves, or which you approve. If there be so, it may be there is more in it than you are aware of; nor will your delivery from it be so easy as you may imagine. God seldom gives up men unto such a way, but it is an effect of his displeasure against their barrenness. He declares therein that he doth not approve of their profession. Take heed lest it prove an entrance into the dreadful judgment ensuing.

Whatever, therefore, it be, let it not seem small in your eyes. There is more evil in the least allowed sin of a professor — I mean, that is willingly continued in — than in the loud and great provocations of open sinners. For besides other aggravations, it includes a mocking of God. And this very caution I now insist upon is frequently pressed on all professors by our apostle in this very epistle, Heb 3:12; Heb 12:15-16.

**(2.)** *Constant neglect of private, secret duties.* This also may be justly feared, lest it. be an effect of the same cause. Now by this neglect I mean not that which is *universal;* for it is sure hard to meet with any one, who hath so much light and conviction as to make profession of religion in any way, but that he will and doth pray and perform other secret duties, at one time or another. Even the worst of men will do so in afflictions, fears, dangers, with surprisals, and the like. Nor do I intend interruptions of duties upon unjustifiable occasions; which though a sin which men ought greatly to be humbled for, and which discovers a “superfluity of naughtiness” yet remaining in them, yet; is it not of so destructive a nature as that which we treat about. I intend, therefore, such an omission of duties as is *general;* where men do seldom or never perform them but when they are excited and pressed by outward accidents or occasions. That this may befall professors the prophet declares, Isa 43:22-23. And it argues much hypocrisy in them; the principal character of a hypocrite being that he *will not pray always.* Nor can there be any greater evidence of a personal barrenness than this neglect. A man may have a ministerial fruitfulness and a personal barrenness; so he may have a family usefulness and a personal thriftlessness. And hereof negligence in private duties is the greatest evidence. Men also may know when those sins are consequences of their barrenness, and to be reckoned among the thorns and briers intended in the text. They may do it, I say, by the difficulty they will meet withal in their recovery, if it be so. Have their failings and negligence been occasional, merely from the impression of present temptations? — a thorough watering of their minds and consciences from the word will enable them to cast off their snares, and to recover themselves unto a due performance of their duties. But if these things proceed from God’s dereliction of them because of their barrenness, whatever they may think and resolve, their recovery will not be so facile. God will make them sensible how foolish and evil a thing it is to forsake him under the means of fruitful obedience*.* They may think, like Samson, to go forth and do as at other times; but they will quickly find their locks cut, and their spiritual strength so decayed as that they have no power for what they thought would prove so easy unto them at any time. They will find their wills and affections so entangled and engaged, that without a fresh supply of grace, scarce less than that administered in their first conversion, they cannot be delivered. So is it with all lusts, sins, and negligences that are consequences of a provoking barrenness under the gospel.

**(3.)** A *total want of some graces, both in their principle and exercise,* is a great evidence of such a condition. Where there is any true saving grace, there is the root and principle of all. Some graces may be more tried and exercised than others, and so be made more evident and conspicuous; for the occasions of their exercise may much more frequently occur: but yet where there is any true grace, at least where it is kept unrusty, vigorous, and active, as it ought to be in all profiting hearers of the word, there every grace of the Spirit is so far kept alive as to be in some readiness for exercise when occasion and opportunity do occur. But if in any there are some graces that are totally wanting, that no occasion doth excite or draw forth to exercise, they have just reason to fear that either those graces which they seem to have are not genuine and saving, but mere common effects of illumination; or that, if they are true, they are under a dangerous declension, on the account of their unanswerableness unto the dispensation of the gospel. For instance, suppose a man to satisfy himself that he hath the graces of faith and prayer, and the like, but yet cannot find that he hath any grain of true zeal for the glory of God, nor any readiness for works of charity with an eye to God’s glory and love to his commands; he hath great reason to fear lest his other graces are false and perishing, or at least that he is signally fallen under the sin of barrenness. For in common grace, one single grace may appear very evident, and win great honor to the profession of them in whom it is, whilst there is a total want of all or many others: but in saving grace it is not so; for though different graces may exceedingly differ in their exercise, yet all of them are equal in their root and principle.

By these, and the like considerations, may professors try their own concernment in this commination.

**Obs. 3.** Ordinarily God proceeds to the rejection and destruction of barren professors by degrees, although they are seldom sensible of it until they fall irrecoverably into ruin.

This ground here is first “disapproved” or “rejected;” then it is “nigh to cursing;” — the curse ensues; after which it is “burned.” And God doth thus proceed with them,

**1.** In *compliance with his own patience, goodness, and long-suffering,* whereby they ought to be led unto repentance. This is the natural tendency of the goodness and patience of God towards sinners, though it be often abused, Rom 2:4-5. Let men and their sin be what they will, God will not deal otherwise with them than as becomes his own goodness and patience. And this is that property of God without a due conception whereof we can never understand aright his righteousness in the government of the world. Ignorance of the nature of it, and how essential it is unto the Divine Being, is the occasion of security in sinning and atheism unto ungodly men, Ecc 8:11-13; 2Pe 3:3-4. And a great temptation it is ofttimes unto them that are godly, Hab 1:12-13; Jer 12:1-2; Psa 73:11-16; Psa 73:21-22. Wherefore, to direct our minds unto a due posture herein, we may consider, —

**(1.)** That the patience of God never came to a *general issue* with mankind but once since the creation; and that was in the flood, 1Pe 3:20. And this one example God will have to be a sufficient warning unto all ungodly sinners of the certainty and severity of his future judgment; so that no men have just reason to be secure in their sin, 2Pe 3:5-7. And therefore he hath engaged himself by promise, that he will no more deal so with mankind, be their sins what they will, until the consummation of all things shall come, Gen 8:21-22. While the earth remaineth there shall be no more such a curse. But there is a limited time contained therein. The earth itself shall at length cease, and then he will execute his judgments fully on the world of ungodly sinners. Blessed be God for that public record of his purpose and patience, without which his continuance of mankind in the world would be matter of astonishment.

**(2.)** The patience of God shall not come to an issue with any *apostate nation or church* until he himself declares and determines that all due means have been used for their recovery, 2Ch 36:15-17. And the judgment hereof he will not leave unto the best of men; — he would not do so unto Elijah himself.

**(3.)** It is a difficult, glorious, and great fruit or *effect of faith,* not to repine at, but to glorify God in his patience towards a wicked, provoking generation of sinners. Even the souls of the saints in heaven seem to express a little too much haste in this matter, Rev 6:9-11. The thing which they desired was suited unto the holiness, righteousness, and faithfulness of God, and wherein he had designed to glorify himself in his appointed season, Rev 19:1-3; but the time of it seemed long unto them: wherefore to glorify God herein is a fruit of faith, Rev 13:10. The faith and patience of the saints are most eminent in waiting quietly until the time of the destruction of the enemies of the church be fully come. And it is so,

**[1.]** Because it is accompanied with *self-denial,* as unto all our interest in this world, and all the desires of nature.

**[2.]** Because the apprehension is most true and infallible, that the righteousness, holiness, and faithfulness of God, will be *exceedingly glorified* in the destruction of apostate, provoking, and ungodly sinners; and this will be in particular in the ruin of Babylon and its whole interest in the world. And this may make our desires inordinate, if not regulated by faith. It is therefore an eminent act of faith, to give glory unto God in the exercise of his patience towards apostate, barren professors; and that which alone can, in these latter days of the world, give rest and peace unto our own souls.

**2.** God will do so to evince *the righteousness of his judgments,* both in the hearts and consciences of them who shall be finally destroyed, “whose end is to be burned;” as also of all others who shall wisely consider of his ways. God endureth all things from the world, “that he may be justified in his sayings, and may overcome when he is judged,” Rom 3:4; that is, not only that all he doth shall be righteous and holy, — which is necessary from his own essential righteousness, whence he will not, whence he cannot do evil, — but his works shall be so wrought, so accomplished, as that the righteousness of them shall be evident, and pleadable by his people against all sayings and reflections of ungodly men. Especially, every thing shall be plain and visibly righteous that he doth in this way towards barren, unprofitable churches, which he had formerly owned and blessed. In his dealing with them, he will leave no color of calling his goodness and faithfulness into question, but will, as it were, refer the righteousness of his proceedings unto all, even unto themselves. So he doth as to his dealing with the church of the Jews when it was grown utterly barren, Isa 5:1-7. So did our Lord Jesus Christ, in his parable, compel the wicked Jews to subscribe unto the righteousness of God in that miserable destruction which was coming on themselves, Mat 21:33-46. And this God doth principally by his gradual procedure with them. His precedent warnings and first degrees of judgments, spiritual or temporal, shall bear witness unto the righteousness of their total ruin. Men at present, through their blindness, hardness of heart, love of sin, do not, it may be, take notice of God’s dealing with them, and are therefore apt to complain when they are surprised with the fatal evil; but the day will come when their consciences shall be awakened unto a dreadful remembrance of all the warnings God gave them, and how slowly he proceeded in his judgments, — when their mouths shall be stopped, and their faces filled with confusion.

**3.** God’s dealings with barren apostates being principally in spiritual judgments, the issue whereof is the total removal of the gospel from them, he will not do it at once, because *others may be yet mixed among them* unto whom he will have the means of grace continued. This Abraham laid down in temporal judgments, as an unquestionable maxim of divine right, that “God would not destroy the righteous with the wicked,” Gen 18:23; Gen 18:25 : which rule, yet, by the way, is confined unto that kind of destruction which was to be a standing token and pledge of the last final judgment, and the damnation of all ungodly men, for in other cases it will admit of some extraordinary exception; but this is the general way of God’s procedure in all judgments, spiritual aunt temporal. Now, if when men openly manifest their barrenness, and daily bring forth thorns and briers, God should immediately remove the word, whilst there are amongst them a people also that are really fruitful unto his glory, it cannot be but that, in an ordinary course of his providence, they must suffer with the rest, and that before God hath fulfilled the whole work of his grace towards them. This was that wherewith he satisfied and quieted the mind of Elijah, when, in a transport of zeal, he complains of the horrible apostasy of the church of Israel, making, as the apostle speaks, “intercession against them;” and he applieth it unto all other seasons of the church, Rom 11:2-5. And we are taught in that example, that when the patience of God towards a highly provoking people seems to interfere with his threatening and the ordinary course of his providence, we should believe that there are yet among them many whose hearts are sincere for God, though for many reasons they are unknown to us. And this should stir us up unto continual prayers for the whole world. When the long-suffering of God is abused by the most, and turned into an increase of their security, yet he hath a blessed end in it towards his own among them, 2Pe 3:3-4; 2Pe 3:9. And this was the state of God’s present dispensation towards these Hebrews. The most of them were obstinate unbelievers, and many of them barren apostates; but yet God continued for a while to exercise patience towards them, and to tender the gospel, unto them. And this he did because there was a “remnant” amongst them “according to the election of grace,” which were to “obtain,” whilst “the rest were hardened,” as our apostle declares, Romans 11. And this patience of God the hardened wretches despised and scoffed at. But yet still God went on in his way and method, because of those amongst them whom, through that patience and long-suffering, he intended to bring to repentance and the acknowledgment of the truth.

Further to clear up this whole matter, it may be inquired what are those *degrees in spiritual judgments* whereby God doth ordinarily proceed against barren professors, which are here intimated in general. And, 1. In such cases God doth usually restrain the *influence of men’s light* upon their own consciences and affections. Their light and knowledge which they have attained may in their notions remain with them, but they are not at all affected with what they know, or guided by it as unto their practice. There is a time when light and knowledge, not improved, do lose all their efficacy. God suffers such an interposition to be made between it and their consciences, by the acting and pride of their lusts, that it is of no use unto them. Whereas formerly, under their convictions, every thing they knew of the mind of God or the gospel pressed on them to endeavor after some conformity unto it; now it hath no power upon them, but only floats in their fancies and memories. And this we see accomplished every day. Men under a barren, apostatizing state, do yet retain some of their light and notions of truth; which they are sensible of no power from, nor have any use of, unless it be to enable them to be the greater scoffers and deriders of others. Now, although this comes to pass through their own sins and lusts as the immediate cause of it, yet it is a spiritual judgment of God also upon them. for their sins. For he withholdeth all the working of his Spirit in and by that light, which alone renders it effectual. His Spirit shall not strive any more therein; and then it is easy for them to “rebel against the light” they have, as he speaks, Job 24:13. And let all men hence take heed, when they begin to find that their light and convictions from the word have not the same power with them and efficacy upon them as formerly they have had; for it is greatly to be feared lest it be a beginning of God’s displeasure upon them. See Hos 9:12.

**2.** God deprives them of all the *gifts* which formerly they received. Gifts are an ability for the due exercise of gospel light and knowledge in the duties of a public concern. These they may be made partakers of who yet prove barren and apostates. But God will not suffer them to be long retained under a course of backsliding. As men neglect their exercise, so God deprives them of them, and makes that very neglect a means of executing this judgment on them. The talent that was but laid up in a napkin was taken away. And this we see exemplified both in whole churches and in particular persons. They lose, or are deprived of the gifts which they had, or which were among them; and are commonly filled with enmity unto and scorn of them by whom they are retained.

And in these two things consists the first act of God’s judgment, in the rejection of the barren ground. Hereby he evidenceth that it is ἀδόκιμος, and such as he will regard no more.

The next is, that they make *approaches towards the curse;* and this is done two ways:

**1.** God having evidenced his rejection of them, he gives them up unto the *temptation of the world,* and the society of ungodly men, whereunto they are engaged by their pleasures or profit. “Men gather them,” saith our Savior, Joh 15:6. Their lusts being let loose from under the power of their light and convictions, especially their love unto the world, they cast themselves into the society of profane and wicked men. Among them they wax worse and worse every day, and learn, in an especial manner, to hate, despise, and blaspheme the good ways of God, which before they had known, owned, and professed. And God will so order things in his providence, as that temptations suited unto their most prevalent lusts shall, on all occasions, be presented unto them, whereby they shall be further ensnared.

**2.** God *casts them out of the hearts and prayers of his people.* This of all other things they least value, yea, they most despise; but it is one of the greatest effects of God’s severity towards them. So he commanded his prophet not to pray for the people, when his heart would not be towards them, Jer 7:16; Jer 11:14; Jer 14:11. And in like cases, though not by express command, yet by his secret providence, he takes off the hearts of his people from them whom he hath designed to ruin for their sins. And we may observe, that our apostle himself, who a long time labored with unspeakable zeal and most fervent supplications to God for the incredulous Hebrews, as he expresseth himself, Rom 9:2-3; Rom 10:1, at length speaks of them as those whom he no more regarded, but looked on as enemies of Christ only, 1Th 2:14-16. And this sets them forward in their way towards the fatal curse.

**Thirdly**, the *curse* itself ensues, which consists in three things. For,

**1.** God takes off their *natural restraints* from sin. The rebukes of a natural conscience, fear, shame, and the like afflictive affections, shall have no more power on them. So he dealt with them that sinned against the light of nature, Rom 1:26-27; and they became like those described, Eph 4:18-19. No men are so visibly under God’s curse as those who, having broken through the bonds of nature, modesty, fear, and shame, do give up themselves unto open sinning in the face of the sun.

**2.** God *judicially hardens* them; which contains the life and the power of the curse here intended, for hereby are men secured unto their final destruction and burning.

**3.** Ofttimes God *signifies this curse* in this world, by wholly casting out such persons from any interest in the dispensation of the word. He doth either utterly take away the preaching of the gospel from them, or give them up unto the conduct of those who, under a pretense thereof, shall cause them to err with lies and delusions; which further seals them up unto their future ruin, 2Th 2:11-12.

And these are some of the ways whereby God dealeth with barren ground, with fruitless and provoking professors, even whilst they are in this world. It is true, these judgments being spiritual, and they being now become wholly carnal, they are for the most part little sensible of them. God, indeed, doth sometimes cause the dread and terror of his wrath so to fall upon the consciences of some of them, as that in this world they are made a spectacle of divine vengeance; but for the most part, being filled with their lusts, and sins, and pleasures, they carry it out bravingly to the end. Howbeit few of them escape such reflections on themselves as makes them sometimes to shrink and groan. But suppose they should be able to carry it out stoutly in this world, so that themselves should neither much feel nor others much observe the curse of God upon them here, yet the day is hastening wherein actual burning, and that for ever, will be their portion.

### vv. 9-12

**Hebrews 6:9-12**

Expositors generally agree in giving these verses as an instance of the great wisdom and prudence used by the apostle in his dealing with these Hebrews. Chrysostom in especial insists upon it, making observations unto that purpose on all the considerable passages in the context. What is really of that nature will occur unto us, and shall be observed in our progress. His design in general is twofold: —

**First**, To *mollify the severity of the preceding commination, and prediction* contained therein, that it might not have an effect on their minds beyond his intention. He knew that, all circumstances considered, it was necessary for him to make use of it; but withal he was careful that none of them who were sincere should be terrified or discouraged. For if men are disanimated in the way wherein they are engaged, by those on whose guidance they depend, and unto whose judgment they are to submit, it makes them despond and give over thoughts of a cheerful progress. Wherefore in all cases our apostle was exceeding careful not in any thing to make heavy or sorrowful the hearts of his disciples, unless it were in case of extreme necessity. Hence is his apology or excuse, as it were, to the Corinthians for having put them to sorrow by some severe reproofs in his former letter to them, 2Co 2:1-2 :

“But I determined this with myself, that I would not come again unto you in heaviness. For if I make you sorry, who is he then that maketh me glad, but the same which is made sorry by me?”

He lets them know, that whatever sorrow he had put them to, it was so unto himself no less than unto them, seeing they were the chiefest causes of his joy and gladness. And thus dealeth he in this place with the Hebrews. Lest they should be amazed with the terror of the preceding commination, and the prediction therein contained of the inevitable and dreadful ruin of slothful apostates and hypocrites, he lets them know that he did no way therein determine or pass a judgment on them, their state and condition. But having far other thoughts and hopes concerning them, and the end of their profession, he yet judged it necessary to excite them unto that diligence which some among them had neglected to use, by declaring the miserable end of those who always abide unfruitful under, or do apostatize from, the profession of the gospel. Herein doth he steer a direct and equal course between the extremes in admonition. For he neither useth so much lenity as to enervate his reproof and warning, nor so much severity as to discourage or provoke those who are warned by him. In a word, he layeth weight upon *things,* and spareth *persons;* the contrary whereunto is the bane of all spiritual admonition.

**Secondly**, He maketh use of this discourse for a *transition unto the second part of his design.* And this was, to propose unto them who were true believers such encouragements and grounds of consolation as might confirm and establish them in their faith and obedience; which are the subjects of the remaining part of this chapter. Wherefore, as, to make way for the severe threatenings which he hath used, it was necessary for him to describe the persons unto whom they did in an especial manner belong, so it was no less requisite that he should describe those also unto whom the ensuing promises and consolations do pertain; which he doth in these verses.

**Heb 6:9.** — Πεπείσμεθα δὲ περὶ ὑμῶν, ἀγαπητοί, τὰ κρείττονα καὶ ἐχόμενα σωτηρίας, εἰ καὶ οἵ τω λαλοῦμεν.

Πεπείσμεθα, “persuasi sumus,” “confidimus.” Bez., “persuasimus nobis,” “we are persuaded.” ᾿Αλαπητοί. Syr., אֲחַי, “my brethren.” Vulg., “dilectissimi.” Rhem., “we confidently trust of you, my best beloved.” Τὰ κρείττονα, “meliora.” Syr., אֵילֵין דְּשַׁפִירֵין, “ea quae sunt bona, pulchra;” “the things that are good or comely.” Καὶ ἐχὸμενα σωτηρίας. Syr., וְקַרַיְבָן לְחַיֵּא, “and such as draw near to life;” that is, eternal. Vulg. Lat., “et viciniora saluti.” Rhem., “and nearer to salvation.” Others generally, “et cum salute conjuncta.” Ours, “and such as accompany salvation;” very properly.

**Heb 6:9.** — But we are persuaded of you, beloved, better things, and such as accompany salvation, although we thus speak.

The especial design of the apostle, in this and the following verses, is to declare his good-will towards the Hebrews, his judgment of their state and condition, the reasons and grounds of that judgment, with the proper use and end of the commination before laid down, that neither theft might be neglected nor themselves discouraged. This verse contains,

**1.** An *expression of his love and good-will* towards them;

**2.** His *judgment* of them;

**3.** The *reason* of his present declaration of both these, with respect unto what he had spoken before unto them, namely, that although he had spoken it *unto them,* he did not speak it *of them.*

**1.** His *love and good-will* he testifies in his compellation, ἀγαπητοί, “beloved.” It is an expression of most entire affection, and is never used in the Gospels but to express the love of God the Father unto his Son Jesus Christ, Mat 3:17; Mat 12:18; Mat 17:5; Mar 1:11; Mar 9:7; Mar 12:6; Luk 3:22; Luk 9:35; Luk 20:13. By the apostles in their epistles it is frequently applied unto believers, especially by Paul, in all those written by him: we might therefore pass it over, as that word which it was usual with him to express his sincere affection by towards all saints. But there seems to be a twofold reason of its especial introduction in this place, both of them respected in the wisdom of our apostle.

**(1.)** Perhaps these Hebrews were ready enough to entertain *jealousies* concerning him, that he had not that affection for them which he had for others. For he had now spent a long time with and among the Gentiles, for their conversion and edification. Among them he had planted very many churches, and that on one point contrary to the judgment of most of these Hebrews, namely, in a liberty from the law and the ceremonies of Moses. In this long converse and work, they might suspect that he had lost his natural love to his countrymen, as is usual in such cases, and as he was much accused to have done. To root this evil surmise out of their minds, as he useth frequently other affectionate compellations in this epistle, so he here calls them his “beloved;” than which he had used no expression of greater endearment towards any of his Gentile converts. And notwithstanding all the provocations and injuries he had received from them, he gave on all occasions the highest demonstration of the most intense affection towards them; never opposing them nor reflecting on them with any severity, but only then and wherein they opposed the gospel and the liberty thereof. This affection was such for them, as his countrymen and kinsmen in the flesh, as that he could willingly have died that they might be saved, Rom 9:2-3. And for this he prayed continually, Rom 10:1. And the addition of love that was made in him upon their conversion cannot be expressed. **(2.)** He hath respect unto his preceding *severe expressions,* as is plain from the close of this verse, “though we thus speak.” As if he had said,

‘Notwithstanding this severe admonition, which I have, upon the consideration of all circumstances, been forced to use, yet my heart stands no otherwise affected towards you but as towards my countrymen, brethren, and saints of God.’And thus, —

**Obs. 1.** It is the duty of the dispensers of the gospel to satisfy their hearers in and of their love in Jesus Christ to their souls and persons.

**2.** The apostle expresseth his *judgment* concerning these Hebrews, “We are persuaded better things of you, and such as accompany salvation;*”* wherein we have, first, the *act of his mind* in this matter: Πεπείσμεθα, “We are persuaded.” Chrysostom insists much on the force of this word. The apostle, as he observes, doth not say, ‘We think,’or ‘We hope;’but he was fully “persuaded.” He lets them know that he was fully satisfied in this matter. And he useth not this word anywhere in his epistles (as he useth it often), but he intends a full and prevalent persuasion. Now this a man may have in spiritual things on three grounds:

**(1.)** By *especial revelation;* so he was certain of the truth of the gospel that was revealed unto him, which he discourseth of, Gal 1:7-8.

**(2.)** By the *evidence of faith;* when any thing is believed on grounds infallible, namely, the revelation of the mind of God in the Scripture, or the promises of the gospel. So he useth this word, Rom 8:38, Πεπείσμεθα γάρ, — “For I am persuaded that neither death nor life,” etc. This he believed, and had an infallible certainty thereof, because God had so promised. So also, 2Ti 1:12 : Οι῏δα γὰρ ᾧ πεπίτεωκα, καὶ πέπεισμαι ὅτι δυνατός ἐστι τὴν παρακαταθήκην μου φυλάξαι — “I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed to him.” He useth the same expression in matter of faith, Rom 14:14.

**(3.)** There is a *certain persuasion of mind, that is founded on moral arguments,* such as may bring a man to a full satisfaction in his mind, but yet so as it is possible he may be deceived. Of this nature is that persuasion, that trust or confidence, which we have of the good condition of other men. So our apostle speaks of Timothy and his faith, 2Ti 1:5 : “The faith that dwelt in thy mother Eunice, πέπεισμαι δὲ ὅτι καὶ ἐν σοί,” — “and I am persuaded in thee also.” He was not persuaded of any sincere faith in Timothy by especial revelation, nor was it the object of his faith from any express word of Scripture, but he was satisfied of it upon such unquestionable grounds and motives as left no room for doubt about it. Some urge to the same purpose Php 1:6, Πέποιθὼς αὐτὸ τοῦτο, — “Being confident of this very thing,” (persuaded of it), “that he who hath begun a good work in you, will perform it to the day of Jesus Christ.” But this persuasion, being built on a supposition that a good work was begun in them, was an act of faith infallible, built on the promises of God and the changeableness of his covenant. His persuasion here concerning the Hebrews was of this latter kind, even that which he had satisfactory reasons and grounds for, which prevailed against all contrary objections. In like manner he speaks of the Romans, Rom 15:14. Πέποιθὼς αὐτὸ τοῦτο, — “And I myself am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye are full of goodness.” The grounds of this persuasion with respect unto the Hebrews, he expresseth in the next verse, where we shall consider them.

**Obs. 2.** It is our duty to come unto the best satisfaction we may in the spiritual condition of them with whom we are to have spiritual communion.

There is not any thing of our mutual duties that the gospel more presseth, or more supposeth. And it is necessary both unto ministers and private Christians. For the former, they are concerned in the advice of the wise man, Pro 27:23, “Be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks.” They are not only to provide *good pasture* and feeding for them, but they must know their *state and condition,* that what they provide for them may be suitable and seasonable. And unto this end there were at first some in the church who had the immediate inspection of the state and walking of the members of it, and were thereby enabled, as Moses said to his father-in-law, Num 10:31, to be “instead of eyes” unto the teachers, to look into the condition of all sorts of persons. Nor can they without it discharge any one duty of their office in a due manner. For ministers to walk towards their people at “peradventure,” and to “fight uncertainly, as men beating the air,” without an acquaintance with their state, and especial consideration of their condition, and what therein is suited unto their edification (as is the manner of many), will leave them at a great uncertainty how to give in their account. See Heb 13:17. Unless a man have some good satisfaction concerning the spiritual condition of those that are committed unto his charge, he can never approve himself among them “a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth,” to give unto all their proportion. And the work of the ministry is not by any means more evacuated and rendered ineffectual, than when men have not a certain design to deal with their hearers according unto what they are persuaded that their spiritual state doth require. How shall they instruct, how shall they warn, how shall they comfort any, but on a supposition of an acquaintance with the state and condition wherein they are? A general preaching at random, without a special scope, directed by the persuasion mentioned, turns the whole work for the most part, both in preachers and hearers, into a useless formality. In brief, this persuasion principally regulates the whole work of the ministry. He that is a physician unto the bodies of men, must acquaint himself with the especial state and condition of his patients, as also of their distempers, wherein his skill and judgment are especially to be exercised. Without that, let him be furnished with the greatest store of good medicines, if he give them out promiscuously unto all comers, all that he doth will be of little use. It may be, his medicines being safe, they will do no harm; and it is as probable they will do as little good. Nor will it be otherwise with the physicians of souls in the like case.

Four things are required to make the dispensation of the word proper and profitable; a *good spring,* a *safe rule,* a *distinct design,* and *enlivening affections.*

**(1.)** The first is the dispenser’s own light and *experience.* He is to see in his work with his own eyes, and not those of other men. And when he is by his own light as a scribe instructed unto the kingdom of God, it is out of the good treasure of his own heart that he is to bring forth good things, new and old.

**(2.)** His *safe rule* is the infallible word of truth. This must be the touchstone of his light and experience. And it is suited unto his whole work, unto all the duties of it, 2Ti 3:16-17. In nothing but what is regulated hereby are any to be attended unto, Isa 8:20.

**(3.)** His *distinct design* lies in the due consideration of the spiritual state and condition of them unto whom the word is to be dispensed. And herein consists the greatest part of the ministerial skill. This is that which secretly differenceth the constant ministerial dispensation of the word from the occasional exercise of the gifts of any. And this doth God make use of to convey unexpected relief or repose unto the souls of men, wherewith they are surprised and affected. If we have not this scope continually before us, we may run apace, but never know whether we are in or out of the way.

**(4.)** The *enlivening affections* that ought to accompany the dispensation of the word, are zeal for the glory of God and compassion for the souls of men. But these things must not here be insisted on. And for private Christians among themselves, their mutual duties are referred unto love and the fruits of it. That special love which ought to be among the disciples of Christ as such, takes up, in the description, injunctions, and directions of it, a great part of the writings of the New Testament. Nothing doth the Lord Christ himself and his apostles so urge upon them as this of mutual love. Upon the right discharge of this duty he frequently declares that his honor in them and by them in this world doth principally depend. And whatever we have besides this, our apostle declares that it is nothing, or of no use in the church of God, 1 Corinthians 13. And the greatest evidence of the degeneracy of Christianity in the world, consists in the open loss of this love amongst those who make profession thereof.

**[1.]** Now this love is founded in our persuasion concerning the spiritual state and condition of each other. I mean, that especial mutual love is so which ought to be among the disciples of Christ as such. For although we are on other grounds obliged unto a *love towards all mankind,* whether friends or enemies, yet that peculiar love which the gospel so chargeth on the disciples of Christ is an effect of, and is built upon their common and mutual interest in Christ. They are to love one another as *members of rite same mystical body,* and united unto the same spiritual Head. Whatever love there may be on other accounts among any of them, which doth not arise from this spring and fountain, it is not that gospel love which ought to be among believers. And how can this be in us, unless we have a good persuasion concerning our mutual interest and in-being in Christ? God forbid that any should press that *peculiarly intense love* that ought to be among the members of the body of Christ, to take off or derogate from that *general love* and usefulness which not only the law of our creation but the gospel also requireth of us in an especial manner towards all men; yea, he who professeth love unto the saints, that peculiar love which is required towards them, and doth not exercise love in general towards all men, — much more if he make the pretense of brotherly love the ground of alienating his affection from the residue of mankind, — can have no assurance that the love he so professeth is sincere, incorrupt, genuine, and without dissimulation. But this special love is the special duty of us all, if we believe the gospel, and without which foundation well laid we can rightly discharge no other mutual duty whatever. Now this, as is evident, we cannot have unless we have a persuasion of the only ground of this love, which is our mutual relation unto Jesus Christ. And to act this love aright as to its object, as grounded on this persuasion, take heed of “evil surmises;” — these are the bane of evangelical love, though some seem to make them their duties. Those concerning whom we hear that they make profession of faith and obedience towards our Lord Jesus Christ, and know not that they any way contradict their profession by wicked works, we are obliged to bear the same love towards as if we knew them sincere. For “charity hopeth all things,” namely, that are good, if we have no certain evidence to the contrary. And thus in general we may have this persuasion concerning “all that in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours.” We have no obligation, indeed, hereunto, towards such as visibly and evidently walk unworthy of that high calling whereby we are called. For concerning such our apostle assures us, that whatever they profess, they are

“enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is their shame, who mind earthly things,” Php 3:18-19.

It is a dishonor, a reproach to Christ and the gospel, that we should persuade ourselves that they are his disciples, and members of his mystical body, whom we see to walk after the manner of the world, and to have their conversation in the lusts of the flesh. These we are still to love, as those who once had, and are yet capable of the renovation of, the image of God upon them; but they proclaim themselves destitute of all those qualifications which are the formal object and reason of this peculiar love.

**[2.]** The Lord Christ hath, by his *institution,* secured us as to a certain rule of this persuasion and love, by the disposal of his disciples into church societies upon such grounds as are a sufficient warranty for it. Thus our apostle, in all his epistles unto the churches, salutes, esteems, judgeth them all to be “saints, and called in Christ Jesus.” For although some of them might not be so really and in the sight of God, yet his persuasion and his love being directed according to the rule, were acceptable unto Christ. And whereas our Lord Jesus hath commanded that all his disciples should join themselves unto and walk in such societies, were there not great confusion brought into the world in and about gospel institutions, we should not be atloss about this persuasion and love; for we should be obliged unto them towards all that are called Christians, until they had openly declared themselves to be “enemies of the cross of Christ.” But we are yet suffering under the confusion of a fatal apostasy, which God in his good time will deliver his churches from.

**[3.]** As we cannot direct our love aright without this persuasion, no more can we exercise any of the duties or fruits of it in a due manner. The fruits of mutual love among Christians are either in things *spiritual,* which concern edification; or in things *temporal,* which concern outward relief. Of the first sort, are admonition, exhortation, instructions, and consolations, mutually administered. Now, how can any man order or make use of these in a right manner, unless he have some directive persuasion of the spiritual condition of them unto whom he doth administer? It is true he may sometimes be therein mistaken; yet it is far better so to be than never to consider what is meet and requisite with respect thereunto. And as for the fruits of the same love in outward things, although they ought to be brought forth in the temporal supplies of all, according to our opportunities and abilities, yet without this persuasion they will want the quickening form and soul of them; which is a design to place our love in them ultimately on Jesus Christ.

**Obs. 3.** We may, as occasions require, publicly testify that good persuasion which we have concerning the spiritual condition of others, and that unto themselves.

Our apostle here acquaints these Hebrews with his good persuasion concerning them; and likewise in all his epistles he still declares his hope and confidence of their blessed interest in Christ unto whom he wrote; and spares not to give them all the titles which really belong only to elect believers. Now, as this is not to be done lightly, not in a way of flattering compliance, not but upon just and firm grounds from Scripture, least of all to give countenance unto any to continue in an evil way or practice; yet in three cases it is warrantable and requisite: —

**(1.)** When it is done for their *due encouragement.* Gracious persons, through their temptations, fears, and sense of sin; yea, whole churches, upon occasion of trials, distresses, and backslidings among them; may so be cast down and despond, as to be discouraged in their duties and progress. In this case it is not only lawful, but expedient, yea necessary, that we should testify unto them that good persuasion which we have concerning their state and condition, with the grounds thereof, as the apostle doth in this place. So in like case testified our Savior himself concerning and unto the church of Smyrna: “I know thy poverty,” what thou complainest of, and art ready to sink under; “but thou art rich,” Revelation 2

**(2.)** It may and ought to be done for their *just vindication.* The disciples and churches of Christ may be falsely accused and charged, and yet it may be with so much probability, or at least appearance of evil, as that they may greatly suffer in their just reputation, whereby the holy name of the Lord Christ is also dishonored. He who falsely accuseth all the brethren before God continually, wants not instruments to fix calumnies upon them among men here below. In such a case it is our indispensable duty to testify our good persuasion concerning them, be they persons or churches, who are so traduced. And if we do it not, we have a copartnership in the guilt of their enemies’false accusations.

**(3.)** When we have any *necessary duty* to discharge towards them, which this testification of our persuasion concerning them may render more effectual, or prevent it having another end than what we aim at, or remove any prejudice out of its way. This was the very case wherein the apostle testifieth his persuasion concerning them unto these Hebrews. His design was to admonish them of some faults, sins, and miscarriages, that had already been among them; and, moreover, to charge them with a care about apostasy from the gospel, which the way wherein some of them were seemed to have a tendency unto. But lest this his dealing with them, which had an appearance of much severity, should have begotten prejudices in their minds against his person and ministry on the one hand, or too much dejected and cast them down on the other, he secures his procedure on both sides with this testification of his confidence concerning their spiritual condition; thereby at once assuring them of his love, and evidencing the necessity of his admonition. And herein hath he, in the example of the wisdom bestowed on him for this end, given us an inviolable rule of our proceeding in like cases.

**Obs. 4.** The best persuasion we can arrive unto concerning the spiritual condition of any, leaves yet room, yea, makes way for, gospel foreatenings, warnings, exhortations, and encouragements. There is nothing more common than to charge the ways of some, that, by persuading men of their regeneration and saintship, they render them secure, and the threatenings of the gospel in an especial manner unuseful unto them. Neither is there any question but that this, as all other ways of God and his grace, may be abused. But those who manage the charge in general may do well to fix it in the first place on the apostles. For there are not any of them but testify the same persuasion concerning all them to whom they wrote; and there is no doubt but that their way of preaching and writing was the same. But yet this hindered them not from the use of all sorts of evangelical comminations, exhortations, and encouragements; from whence we are to take our example and warranty for the same practice. This, therefore, lies evident in their procedure, which is our instruction and rule, namely, that looking on men as believers, or being persuaded of their good spiritual condition, we yet ought to apply unto them all the means appointed by Christ for the begetting, increase, and continuance of grace in them. And the reasons hereof are evident; for,

**(1.)** Although that persuasion which men may have of their spiritual condition, or which others may have or declare concerning them, may strengthen their peace, yet it neither doth nor ought to incline them unto security. “Thou standest by faith,” saith the apostle; “be not high-minded, but fear,” Rom 11:20; — ‘Take the peace and comfort of thy faith, but be neither proud nor secure.’Where there is any such effect hereof, towards a Laodicean security, there is a just ground to suspect that the persuasion itself is a pernicious mistake. And it is the duty of all professors to give heed diligently lest any such “root of bitterness” spring up amongst them and defile them. If once a persuasion of this good condition begins to influence towards security and a neglect of duty, then ought they to be in the highest jealousy concerning their condition itself.

**(2.)** Whatever men’s state and condition be under the gospel, they are still obliged unto *the means appointed for their edification* and preservation. Amongst all the vain imaginations about religious things vented in these latter days, there is none savours more rankly of satanical pride and human folly than that of such a state of perfection attainable in this life, wherein, as it is phrased, men should be “above ordinances;” that is, should be “vainly puffed up in their fleshly minds,” above the authority, and wisdom, and truth of God. Whilst we are in the way, under the conduct of the gospel, we need all the advantages it affords in our progress. Of this sort are all the threatenings, promises, exhortations, encouragements, contained in it. And the proper use of gospel threatenings in particular, such as that here insisted on by our apostle, I have declared at large on the first and second verses of the fourth chapter, and shall not here again insist thereon.

It followeth hence,

**(1.)** That whatever be the state and condition of them unto whom we dispense the word, or whatever we may conceive it to be, we are not, with respect thereunto, to *baulk or waive the delivery and pressing of any evangelical warning,* or the severest threatening contained in the gospel, much less encouragements and motives unto faith and obedience, though we are persuaded they both believe and obey. For as it is not impossible but that both they and we may be mistaken in their condition, and that the severest menaces may be their proper portion in the world; so, be their condition what it will, all these things have not only their *proper use* towards them, but are *necessary* for them in their several kinds. For although they, every one of them as singly laid down, are of the same signification in themselves, yet in their application unto men they have a sense suited unto their condition. For instance: — the same threatening, as applied unto *unbelievers,* tends to beget dread, terror, and fear of wrath in them, to fill them with evidences of God’s displeasure: as applied unto *believers,* it tends only to fill them with reverential fear of God, care to avoid the sin threatened, and to excite diligence in the use of means for its avoidance. All of them are good for all. As, therefore, if we should always, in the dispensation of the word, insist on the threatenings of the law and gospel, — whose denunciation multitudes do certainly stand need of, — we might weaken and discourage those whom God would not have to be discouraged; so, on the other hand, if, out of an apprehension that our people or congregations are made up of believers, we should continually insist on the promises of the gospel, with the like springs of consolation, seldom or never pressing on them the threatenings and severe menaces thereof, we should certainly defraud them of a blessed means which God hath ordained for their edification and preservation in faith. The holy intermixture of all these things in the Scripture itself is to be our rule, and not any imagination of our own.

**(2.)** That others should not think themselves severely dealt with, when they are pressed on and urged with the severest *threatenings* of the gospel. Let them not say or think in their hearts, ‘This preacher looks upon us as persons unregenerate, or hypocrites; perhaps out of ill-will unto us.’It is certain that on such occasions men are apt to give place to such surmises; for an apprehension thereof is the reason why the apostle maketh as it were this apology for the use of the foregoing severe commination. As if he had said, ‘Do not you entertain any hard thoughts or evil surmises concerning me or my dealing with you in this matter. There are other reasons of my thus dealing with you; for as unto your personal interest in the grace of Christ, I have as yet a good persuasion, although I thus speak.’And let others take heed lest they fall into any such apprehension, which will certainly defeat them of the wholesome fruit of the word. Sharp frosts are needful to make the ground fruitful, as well as the clearest sunshine. And if a tree be not sometimes pressed on by the wind, it will never well firm its roots in the ground. Sharp reproofs, and earnestness in pressing gospel comminations, are sometimes as needful for the best of us as the administration of the richest and most precious promises, Hos 10:11.

**3.** Having considered in general the good persuasion of the apostle concerning those Hebrews, we may consider in especial his expression of the things which he was so persuaded to be in them. And this is double:

**(1.)** Τὰ κρείττονα, — “Better things;”

**(2.)** ᾿Εχόμενα σωτηρίας, — “Such as accompany salvation.”

**(1.)** He was persuaded concerning them τὰ κρείττονα, — “better things.” There seems to be a *comparison* included in this expression, and not only an *opposition* unto what was [formerly] spoken. If so, then there is a supposition of some good things granted unto those [formerly] treated of. This therefore cannot refer unto the verses immediately before, which express only their barrenness and destruction, but it must relate unto verses 4-6, where the spiritual gifts collated on them are enumerated. They are “good things” in themselves, but yet such good things as may perish, and they also on whom they are bestowed. Those who enjoy them may yet be barren ground, and so cursed and burned. But the apostle is persuaded “better things” of those to whom he speaks, namely, “such things as accompany salvation;” — such as whosoever is made partaker of shall never perish eternally. Or τὰ κρείττονα may be put for τὰ χρηστά, “good things,” as Chrysostom supposeth. But yet neither is there any need of supposing an impropriety in the expression; for it is usual to express excellent things in words of the comparative degree, although no comparison be included, especially when they are made mention of with respect unto others who have no interest in them. However, here is certainly an opposition unto what was before affirmed concerning others. And that may be reduced unto two heads:

**[1.]** That they were *barren* and destitute of all saving grace and fruits.

**[2.]** That they should in the end be *destroyed.* These “better things” must be opposed to the one or other of these, or unto them both. If they are opposed unto the first, then especial saving grace and fruit-bearing, such as are peculiar unto God’s elect, proceeding from the real sanctification of the Spirit, such as no perishing gifted hypocrites can be partakers of, are intended. If unto the latter, then those “better things” respect not their qualification, but their condition; that is, freedom from the curse and wrath of God, and from perishing under them: ‘I am persuaded it will go better with you than with such apostates.’It may be both are included; but the first is certainly intended, namely, that these Hebrews were not barren, but such as brought forth the saving fruits of the Spirit of grace.

**(2.)** For of these things it is added, Καὶ ἐχόμενα σωτηρίας*, —* “Such as accompany salvation:” literally, “such as have salvation;” that is, such as have saving grace in them, and eternal salvation infallibly annexed unto them, — things that are not bestowed on any, such as are not wrought in any, but those that shall be saved; that is, in brief, true faith and sincere obedience. For in whomsoever these are found, they shall be saved, by virtue of the faithfulness of God in the covenant of grace. And we may observe hence, —

**Obs. 5.** That among professors of the gospel some are partakers of “better things” than others.

They were all professors concerning whom the apostle discourseth in this and the preceding verses; and yet, notwithstanding any good things that some might have had, or might be supposed to have had, others of them had better things than they. And this difference may be observed, first in the degrees, and secondly in the kinds of the things intended: —

**(1.)** Spiritual gifts are of one kind. For although there are several sorts of them, yet they have all the same general nature; they are all gifts, and no more. The difference, therefore, that is amongst them being not to be taken from their own *especial nature,* but their *use* and tendency unto the common end of them all, I take it only to be gradual. For instance, to speak with tongues and to prophesy, are two gifts of different sorts; but whereas they are both gifts of the Spirit, and are designed unto the furtherance of the gospel and edification of the church, the true difference between them is to be taken from their usefulness unto this end. Those, therefore, who have only *gifts in the church,* as they have *different gifts,* so they have some of them *better gifts* than others; some as to the especial kinds of gifts, but mostly as to the degrees of their usefulness unto their proper end. Hence our apostle, having reckoned up the various and manifold gifts of the Spirit, adds this advice unto the Corinthians, upon the consideration of them, Ζηλοῦτε δὲ τὰ χαρίσματα τὰ χρείττονα, 1Co 12:31; “Covet earnestly the best gifts,” — those that tend most to the edification of the church. Thus ever it was, and ever it will be, in the church of God; some have had, and some have better gifts than others. And as the whole church is hence to learn to acquiesce in, and submit to the sovereignty of the Spirit of God, “who divideth unto every man severally as he will;” so those who have received these better and differing gifts, either in their especial nature or degrees of usefulness, have some duties singularly incumbent on them, and whose discharge will be required at their hands: as, —

**[1.]** To walk *humbly,* with a constant care that a sense of their gifts and abilities do not in their minds puff them up, fill them with conceits of themselves, as though they were somewhat, and so make them exalt themselves above their brethren, in the apostolical and primitive church, when there was nothing of that secular grandeur, promotion, preferments, dignities, amongst the ministers of the church, as now-a-days fill the world with pride and domination, all the danger of a hurtful elation of mind in one above another was from the *eminency of gifts* which some had received above others. And it cannot be denied but that the abuse hereof laid the foundation of all that swelling secular pride and cursed domination, or lordly rule, which afterwards pestered the church. The two things which the apostle Peter in one place cautions and chargeth the elders and guides of the church against, became their ruin, namely, filthy lucre, and love of domination over the Lord’s heritage, 1Pe 5:2-3. And, indeed, it is a very hard and difficult matter for men totally to suppress those insinuations of a good conceit of themselves, and preferring themselves before others, which gifts singular in their use and kind will suggest. Neither will it be effected without a constant exercise of grace. For this cause the apostle would not have a “novice” called to the ministry, or public exercise of spiritual gifts, namely, “lest he be puffed up with pride, and fall into the condemnation of the devil,” 1Ti 3:6. Afflictions and temptations for the most part, are a needful balance for eminent gifts. This, therefore, the Scripture hath provided against, both warning us that knowledge, which is the matter of all spiritual gifts, will puff up; and forbidding us to boast in them, because they are things which are freely bestowed on us, without respect unto any thing of good or worth in ourselves, 1Co 4:7. And, if we reckon aright, those of us whose gifts are inferior unto those of other men, — provided we use and improve what we have received unto the best advantage we are able, — have no reason to envy them whose gifts outshine ours. For, if they are gracious, they have work enough cut out for them to keep them watchful over themselves unto humility; where yet it is to be feared that things do not always so well succeed, but that, by sinful surprisals of self-elating imaginations, there is work made for repentance and trouble. Yea, he who is eminently gifted, if he be not eminently humble, hath but an unquiet life within doors. And if such a person be not truly gracious, he is in the ready way to “fall into the condemnation of the devil.” Such a person is a prey to every temptation, and will also seduce himself into all evil.

**[2.]** It is required of such persons, as to be humble, so in an especial manner to be *thankful.* The things whereof they are partakers are gifts, and not to be thankful for gifts, is the most proper ingratitude.

**[3.]** A *fruitfulness* proportionable unto the excellency of their gifts. He who had received five talents was not only obliged to trade with them, but to get five talents more. The increase of one or two talents would not have served his turn. To whom much is given, of him not *somewhat,* but *much* is required. The hiding of many talents is a sin whereof there is no instance in the Scripture; it is a sin that hath a greatness in it not to be supposed; and those who may be concerned in it ought to tremble with the apprehensions of it. Our Lord is coming, and, alas! there is none of us who have traded with his talents as we ought to have done. We hope that, in his infinite mercy and compassion, he will spare and pardon, and accept of that little which we have endeavored after in sincerity; but in the. meantime we ought always to consider that labor and fruitfulness ought to be proportioned unto what we have received. But yet these are not the “better things” here directly intended. For from them, or any thing that is in the best of them, no such conclusion can be made as that here by our apostle, seeing he had showed before that they might all perish and be lost.

**(2.)** There are *spiritual things* which differ in their whole kind and nature from other things, and are better than they as to their essence and being. Such is all saving grace, with all the fruits of it. I shall not now stay to prove that true saving grace differs specifically from all common grace, however advanced in its exercise by the company and help of spiritual gifts, much less to wrangle about what doth formally constitute a specifical difference between things. But this I say plainly, which I can prove assuredly, that true gospel faith and sincere obedience are better things than the most glorious hypocrite or most reformed unregenerate person was ever made partaker of. In the visible professing church all things outwardly seem to be equal. There are the same ordinances administered unto all, the same profession of faith is made by all, the same outward duties are attended unto, and scandalous offenses are by all avoided. But yet things are not internally equal. “Many are called, but few are chosen.” “In a great house there are vessels of wood and stone,” as well as of “gold and silver.” All that eat outwardly in ordinances of the bread of life, do not feed on the hidden manna. All that have their names enrolled in the church’s book may not yet have them written in the Lamb’s book. There are yet. “better things” than gifts, profession, participation of ordinances, and whatever is of the like nature. And the use hereof, in one word, is to warn all sorts of persons that they rest not in, that they take not up with an interest in or participation of, the privileges of the church, with a common profession, which may give them a name to live; seeing they may be dead or in a perishing condition in the meantime.

**Obs. 6.** There are, according to the tenor of the covenant of grace, such things bestowed on some persons as salvation doth infallibly accompany and ensue upon; better things, and such as have salvation accompanying of them. — This assertion is founded on the nature of the covenant of grace. In the first covenant it was not so. The best things bestowed by virtue of it might perish, and did so. Many excellent things were bestowed on us when we were created in the image of God: but they were all such things as we might lose, and did lose; and thereby came short of that glory of God which we were created for. But in the covenant of grace there is such a disposal and concatenation of spiritual things, that a real participation of some of them doth infallibly conclude unto an indefeasible interest in them all. This doth the apostle assure us in an express enumeration of them, Rom 8:29-30. For instance, there is a saving faith of this nature. For,

**(1.)** It is an effect of God’s immutable purpose of election. If that, therefore, cannot be changed, this cannot utterly fail and be lost. “Whom he did predestinate, them he also calleth;” that is, to saving faith by Jesus Christ. Faith is of God’s elect; and they only believe truly who are “ordained to eternal life.”

**(2.)** The Lord Christ intercedeth that this faith may never fail, or be utterly lost, Joh 17:9; Joh 17:11; Joh 17:15, etc.

**(3.)** The power of God is engaged in the preservation of it, 2Pe 1:3;1Pe 1:5; Eph 1:19-20.

**(4.)** The promises of the covenant are expressly multiplied unto this purpose, Jer 31:31-34; Jer 32:38-40. And the like may be said of all other saving graces. And on this ground doth the apostle call those “better things” that these Hebrews were made partakers of, being “such as accompany salvation.”

**Obs. 7.** It is the duty of all professors strictly to examine themselves concerning their participation of those “better things which accompany salvation.” — Their condition is deplorable, who, under an outward profession, do satisfy themselves with those common gifts, graces, and duties, which are separable from salvation. Yet that it is so with many in the world, who thereon cry, “Peace, peace, whilst sudden destruction is coming upon them,” is openly manifest. See the advice of the apostle express to this purpose, 2Co 13:5.

We may yet further observe how variously the apostle treats these Hebrews. Sometimes he styles them “holy brethren,” affirming them to be “partakers of the heavenly calling;” so also, that they had those “better things” in them “which accompany salvation.” Sometimes he tells them that they were “dull” and “slothful,” and “had need to be taught again what are the principles of the oracles of God;” and sets before them the final destruction of apostates, to ingenerate a fear and apprehension of the terror of the Lord in them. Now this variety in the apostle’s treating of them proceeds not from present commotions, nor from any rhetorical artifice, but from a regular and steady judgment concerning the condition of the whole church. For,

**(1.)** There were, indeed, several sorts of professors among them, answering the several descriptions he gives of them. He spake, therefore, to the whole community indefinitely, leaving the especial application of what he speaks unto themselves in particular, according as their different conditions did require. And this is the only safe and prudent way for ministers to deal with their flocks. For when any conceive themselves by other circumstances to be singled out for reproof and threatening, they commonly draw forth disadvantage to themselves thereby.

**(2.)** The best of the hearers of the gospel may have much to be blamed in them, although their sincerity in general ought to be highly approved.

**(3.)** Severe threatenings in the dispensation of the gospel are usually proposed unto them who yet are not absolutely liable to the penalty threatened. They do not predict what will come to pass, but warn what is to be avoided.

## Arthur W. Pink

### vv. 4-6 Apostasy

The passage which is now to occupy our attention is one of the most solemn in the Hebrews’ epistle, yea, to be met with anywhere in the New Testament. Probably few regenerate souls have read it thoughtfully without being moved to fear and trembling. Careless professors have frequently been rendered uneasy in conscience as they have heard its awe-inspiring language. It speaks of a class of persons who had been highly privileged, who had been singularly favored, but who, so far from having improved their opportunities, had wretchedly perverted them; who had brought shame and reproach on the cause of Christ; and who were in such a hopeless condition that it was "impossible to renew them again unto repentance." Well does it become each one of us to earnestly lift up his heart to God, beseeching Him to prevent us making such a shipwreck of the faith.

As perhaps the majority of our readers are aware, the verses before us have proved one of the fiercest theological battlegrounds of the centuries. It is at this point that the hottest fights between Calvinists and Arminians have been waged. Those who believe that it is possible for a real Christian to so sin and backslide as to fall from grace and be lost eternally, have confidently appealed to these verses for proof of their theory. It is much to be feared their theory prejudiced them so much, that they were incapable of examining impartially and weighing carefully its varied terms. With their minds so biased by their views of apostasy, they have rather taken it for granted that this passage describes a true child of God, who, through turning his back upon Christ, ultimately perishes. But Scripture bids us "Prove all things" (1 Thess. 5:21), and this calls for something more than a superficial and hurried investigation of what is, admittedly, a difficult passage.

If on the one hand, Arminians have been too ready to read into this passage their unscriptural dogma of the apostasy of a Christian, it must be confessed that many Calvinists have failed to grapple successfully with and interpret satisfactorily the most knotty points in these verses. They are right in affirming that Scripture teaches, most emphatically and unequivocably the Divine preservation and the human perseverance of the saints, as they have also wisely pointed out that the Word of God does not and cannot contradict itself. If our Lord asserted that His sheep should "never perish" (John 10:28), then certainly Hebrews 6 will not teach that some of them do. If through the apostle Paul the Holy Spirit assures us that nothing can separate the children from the love of their Father (Rom. 8:35-39), then, without doubt, the portion now before us does not declare that something will. It may not always be easy to discover the perfect consistency of one scripture with another, yet we must hold fast to the unerring harmony and integrity of God’s Truth.

The chief difficulty connected with our passage is to make sure of the class of persons who are there in view. Is the Holy Spirit here describing regenerated or unregenerated souls? The next thing is to ascertain what is meant by, "If they shall fall away." The last, what is denoted by "It is impossible to renew them again unto repentance." Anticipating our exposition, we are fully assured that the "falling away" which is here spoken of signifies a deliberate, complete and final repudiation of Christ—a sin for which there is no forgiveness. So too we understand the "impossible" to renew them again to repentance, announces that their condition and case is beyond hope of recovery. Because of this, Calvinists have, generally, affirmed that this passage is treating of mere professors. But over against this there are two insuperable objections: first, mere professors have nothing from which to "fall away"; second, mere professors have never been "renewed" unto repentance.

In addition to the controversy which these verses have occasioned, not a few have turned them unto an unwarrantable use. "Misapprehension of this passage has also, I believe, in many cases occasioned extreme distress of mind to two classes of persons,—to nominal professors, who, after falling into gross sin, have been awakened to serious reflection; and to real Christians, on their falling under the power of mental disease, sinking into a state of spiritual languor, or being betrayed into such transgressions of the Divine law as David and Peter were guilty of: and this has thrown all but insurmountable obstacles in the way of both ‘fleeing for refuge, to lay hold on the hope set before them’ in the Gospel. All this makes it the more necessary that we should carefully inquire into the meaning of the passage. When rightly understood, it will be found to give no countenance to any of the false conclusions which have been drawn from it, but to be like every other part of inspired Scripture, ‘profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness’,—well-fitted to produce caution, no way calculated to induce despair" (Dr. J. Brown).

Before attempting an elucidation of the above-mentioned difficulties, and to prepare the way for our exposition of these verses, the contents of which have so sorely puzzled many, let us recall, once more, the condition of soul into which these Hebrew Christians had fallen. They had "become dull of hearing" (Heb. 5:11), "unskillful in the Word of Righteousness" (Heb. 5:13), unable to masticate "strong meat" (Heb. 5:14). This state was fraught with the most dangerous consequences. "The Hebrews had become lukewarm, negligent, and inert; the gospel, once dearly seen and dearly loved by them, had become to them dull and vague; the persecutions and contempt of their countrymen a grievous burden, under which they groaned, and under which they did not enjoy fellowship with the Lord Jesus. Darkness, doubt, gloom, indecision, and consequently a walk in which the power of Christ’s love was not manifest, characterized them. Now, if they continued in this state, what else could be the result but apostasy? Forgetfulness, if continued, must end in rejection, apathy in antipathy, unfaithfulness in infidelity.

"Such was their danger. And if they succumbed to it their state was hopeless. No other gospel remains to be preached, no other power to rescue and raise them. They had heard and known the voice which saith, ‘Come unto Me, and I will give you rest’. They had professed to believe in the Lord who died for sinners, and to have chosen Him as their Savior and Master. And now they were forgetting and forsaking the Rock of their Salvation. If they deliberately and wilfully continued in this state, they were in danger of final impenitence and hardness of heart.

"The exhortation must be viewed in connection with the special circumstances of the Hebrews. After the rejection of the Messiah by Israel, the gospel had been preached unto the Jews by the apostles, and the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit had been manifested among them. The Hebrews had accepted the gospel of the once crucified and now glorified Redeemer, who sent down from heaven the Spirit, a sign of His exaltation, and a pledge of the future inheritance. Having thus entered into the sphere of new covenant manifestation, any one who willfully abandoned it could only relapse into that phase of Judaism which crucified the Lord Jesus. There was no other alternative for them, but either to go on to the full knowledge of the heavenly priesthood of Christ, and to the believer’s acceptance and worship through the Mediator in the sanctuary above, or fall back into the attitude, not of the godly Israelites before Pentecost, such as John the Baptist and those who waited for the promised redemption, nor even into the condition of those for whom the Savior prayed, ‘for they know not what they do’; but into a state of willful conscious enmity against Christ, and the sin of rejecting Him, and putting Him to an open shame" (Adolph Saphir).

"The danger to which this spiritual inertness exposed the Hebrews was such as to justify the strongest language of expostulation and reproof. Apostasy from Christ was a step more easy and natural to a Jewish than to a Gentile believer, because the way was always open and inviting them, as men, to return to those associations which once carried with them the outward sanctification of Jehovah’s name, and which only the power of grace had enabled them to renounce. When heavenly realities became inoperative in their souls, the visible image was before them still, and here was the danger of their giving it the homage of their souls. If there were not an habitual exercise of their spiritual senses, the power of discernment could not remain: they would call evil good, and good evil. The ignorance which springs from spiritual neglect begins its own punishment of apathetic dullness on the once clear mind, and robs the spirit of its power to detect the wily methods of the Devil. It is in the presence of God alone that the Christian can exert his spiritual energies with effect. Abiding in Christ, maintains us in that presence. A more unhappy error cannot befall a believer than to separate, in the habit of his mind, acquired knowledge from the living Christ. Faith dies at once when separated from its object. Knowledge indeed is precious, but the knowledge of God is a progressive thing (Col. 1:10), whose end is not obtained this side of the glory (1 Cor. 8:2). The extreme experience of an advancing Christian is that of continual initiation. With a prospect ever-widening he has a daily deepening apprehension of the grace wherein he stands, and in which he is more and more established, by the word of righteousness . . .

"A clear and growing faith, in heavenly things was needed to preserve Jewish Christians from relapse. To return to Judaism was to give up Christ, who had left their house ‘desolate’ (Matthew 23:38). It was to fall from grace, and place themselves not only under the general curse of the law, but that particular imprecation which had brought the guilt of Jesus’ blood on the reprobate and blinded nation of His murderers" (A. Pridham). It should be pointed out, however, that it is just as easy, and the attraction is just as real, for a Gentile Christian to return to that world out of which the Lord has called him, as it was for a Jewish Christian to go back again to Judaism. And just in proportion as the Christian fails to walk with God daily, so does the world obtain power over his heart, mind and life; and a continuance in worldliness is fraught with the most direful and fatal consequences.

"For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened" etc. (verse 4). Here the apostle continues the digression which he began at Hebrews 5:11. The parenthesis has two divisions: the first, Hebrews 5:11-14 is reprehensible; the second, Hebrews 6:1-20 is hortatory. In chapter 6 he exhorts the Hebrews unto two duties: to progress in the Christian course (verses 1-11); to persevere therein (verses 12-20). The first exhortation is proposed in verses 1,2 and qualified in verse 3. The motive to obedience is drawn from the danger of apostasy (verses 4-6). The opening "For" of verse 4 intimates the close connection of our present passage with that which immediately precedes. It draws a conclusion from what the apostle had been saying in Hebrews 5:11-14. It amplifies the "if" in verse 3. It points a most solemn warning against their continuance in their present sloth. It draws a terrible contrast from the possibility of verse 3. "The apostle regards the retrogression of the Hebrews with dismay. He sees in it the danger of an entire, confirmed, wilful, and irrecoverable apostasy from the truth. He beholds them on the brink of a precipice, and he therefore lifts up his voice, and with vehement yet loving earnestness he warns them against so fearful an evil" (Adolph Saphir).

Three things claim our careful attention in coming closer to our passage: the persons here spoken of, the sin they commit, the doom pronounced upon them. In considering the persons spoken of it is of first importance to note that the apostle does not say, "us who were once enlightened", nor even "you", instead, he says "those". In sharp contrast from them, he says to the Hebrews, "Beloved, we are persuaded better things of you".

"Afterwards, when the apostle comes to declare his hope and persuasion concerning these Hebrews that they were not such as those whom he had before described, nor such as would fall away unto perdition, he doth it upon three grounds whereon they were differenced from them as: 1. That they had such things as did ‘accompany salvation’; that is, such as salvation is inseparable from. None of these things therefore had he ascribed unto those whom he describeth in this place (verses 4-6); for if he had so done, they would not have been unto him an argument and evidence of a contrary end, that these should not fall away and perish as well as those. Wherefore he ascribes nothing to these here in the text that doth peculiarly ‘accompany salvation’. 2. He describes them by their duties of obedience and fruits of faith. This was their ‘work and labor of love’ towards the name of God, verse 10. And hereby, also, doth he differentiate them from those in the text, concerning whom he supposeth that they may perish eternally, which these fruits of saving faith and sincere love cannot do. 3. He adds, that, in the preservation of those there mentioned, the faithfulness of God was concerned: ‘God is not unrighteous to forget’. For they were such he intended as were interested in the covenant of grace, with respect whereunto alone there is any engagement on the faithfulness or righteousness of God to preserve men from apostasy and ruin; and there is so with an equal respect unto all who are so taken into the covenant. But of those in the text he supposeth no such thing; and thereupon doth not intimate that either the righteousness or faithfulness of God was anyway engaged for their preservation, but rather the contrary" (Dr. John Owen).

It is scarcely accurate to designate as "mere professors" those described in verses 4,5. They were a class who had enjoyed great privileges, beyond any such as now accompany the preaching of the Gospel. Those here portrayed are said to have had five advantages, which is in contrast from the six things enumerated in verses 1, 2, which things belong to man in the flesh, under Judaism. Five is the number of grace, and the blessings here mentioned pertain to the Christian dispensation. Yet were they not true Christians. This is evident from what is not said. Observe, they were not spoken of as God’s elect, as those for whom Christ died, as those who were born of the Spirit. They are not said to be justified, forgiven, accepted in the Beloved. Nor is anything said of their faith, love, or obedience. Yet these are the very things which distinguish a real child of God. First, they had been "enlightened". The Sun of righteousness had shone with healing in His wings, and, as Matthew 4:16 says, "The people which sat in darkness saw great light, and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up". Unlike the heathen, whom Christ, in the days of His flesh, visited not, those who came under the sound of His voice were wondrously and gloriously illumined.

The Greek word for "enlightened" here signifies "to give light or knowledge by teaching". It is so rendered by the Septuagint in Judges 13:8, 2 Kings 12:2, 17:27. The apostle Paul uses it for "to make manifest", or "bring to light" in 1 Corinthians 4:5, 2 Timothy 1:10. Satan blinds the minds of those who believe not, lest "the light of the gospel should shine unto them" (2 Cor. 4:4), that is, give the knowledge of it. Thus, "enlightened" here means to be instructed in the doctrine of the gospel, so as to have a clear apprehension of it. In the parallel passage in Hebrews 10:26 the same people are said to have "received the knowledge of the truth", cf. also 2 Peter 2:20, 21. It is, however, only a natural knowledge of spiritual things, such as is acquired by outward hearing or reading; just as one may be enlightened by taking up the special study of one of the sciences. It falls far short of that spiritual enlightenment which transforms (2 Cor. 3:18). An illustration of a unregenerate person being "enlightened", as here, is found in the case of Balaam; Numbers 24:4.

Second, they had "tasted" of the heavenly gift. To "taste" is to have a personal experience of, in contrast from mere report. "Tasting does not include eating, much less digesting and turning into nourishment what is so tasted; for its nature being only thereby discerned it may be refused, yea, though we like its relish and savor, on some other consideration. The persons here described, then, are those who have to a certain degree understood and relished the revelation of mercy; like the stony-ground hearers they have received the Word with a transcient joy" (John Owen). The "tasting" is in contrast from the "eating" of John 6:50-56.

Opinion is divided as to whether the "heavenly gift" refers to the Lord Jesus or the person of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps it is not possible for us to be dogmatic on the point. Really, the difference is without a distinction, for the Spirit is here to glorify Christ, as He came from the Father by Christ as His ascension "Gift" to His people. If the reference be to the Lord Jesus, John 3:16, 4:10, etc., would be pertinent references: if to the Holy Spirit, Acts 2:38, 8:20, 10:45, 11:17. Personally, we rather incline to the latter. This Divine Gift is here said to be "heavenly" because from Heaven, and leading to Heaven, in contrast from Judaism—cf. Acts 2:2, 1 Peter 1:12. Of this "Gift" these apostates had "tasted", or had an experience of: compare Matthew 27:34 where "tasting" is opposed to actual drinking. Those here in view had had an acquaintance with the Gospel, as to gain such a measure of its blessedness as to greatly aggravate their sin and doom. An illustration of this is found in Matthew 13:20, 21.

Third, they were "made partakers of the Holy Spirit". First, it should be pointed out that the Greek word for "partakers" here is a different one from that used in Colossians 1:12 and 2 Peter 1:4, where real Christians are in view. The word here simply means "companions", referring to what is external rather than internal. It is to be observed that this item is placed in the center of the five, and this because it describes the animating principle of the other four, which are all effects. These apostates had never been "born of the Spirit" (John 3:6), still less were their bodies His "temples" (1 Cor. 6:19). Nor do we believe this verse teaches that the Holy Spirit had, at any time, wrought within them, otherwise Philippians 1:6 would be contravened. It means that they had shared in the benefit of His supernatural operations and manifestations: "The place was shaken" (Acts 4:31) illustrates. We quote below from Dr. J. Brown:

"It is highly probable that the inspired writer refers primarily to the miraculous gifts and operations of the Holy Spirit by which the primitive dispensation of Christianity was administered. These gifts were by no means confined to those who were ‘transformed by the renewing of their minds’. The words of our Lord in Matthew 7:22, 23 and of Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:1, 2 seem to intimate, that the possession of these unrenewed men was not very uncommon in that age; at any rate they plainly show that their possession and an unregenerate state were by no means incompatible".

Fourth, "And have tasted the good Word of God". "I understand by this expression the promise of God respecting the Messiah, the sum and substance of all. It deserves notice that this promise is by way of eminence termed by Jeremiah ‘that good word’ (Jer. 33:14). To ‘taste’, then, this ‘good Word of God’, is to experience that God has been faithful to His promise—to enjoy, so far as an unconverted man can enjoy the blessings and advantages which flow from that promise being fulfilled. To ‘taste the good Word of God’, seems, just to enjoy the advantages of the new dispensation" (Dr. J. Brown). Further confirmation that the apostle is here referring to that which these apostates had witnessed of the fulfillment of God’s promise is obtained by comparing Jeremiah 29:10, "After seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform My good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place".

Observe how studiously the apostle still keeps to the word "taste", the better to enable us to identify them. They could not say with Jeremiah, "Thy words were found and I did eat them" (Jer. 15:16). "It is as though he said, I speak not of those who have received nourishment; but of such as have so far tasted it, as that they ought to have desired it as ‘sincere milk’ and grown thereby" (Dr. John Owen). A solemn example of one who merely "tasted" the good Word of God is found in Mark 6:20: "for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly".

Fifth, "And the powers of the world to come," or "age to come." The reference here is to the new dispensation which was to be ushered in by Israel’s Messiah according to Old Testament predictions. It corresponds with "these last days" of Hebrews 1:2, and is in contrast from the "time past" or Mosaic economy. Their Messiah was none other than the "mighty God" (Isa. 9), and wondrous and glorious, stupendous and unique, were His miraculous works. These "powers" of the new Age are mentioned in Hebrews 2:4, to our comments on which we would refer the reader. Of these mighty "powers" these apostates had "tasted", or had an experience of. They had been personal witnesses of the miracles of Christ, and also of the wonders that followed His ascension, when such glorious manifestations of the Spirit were given. Thus they were "without excuse". Convincing and conclusive evidence had been set before them, but there had been no answering faith in their hearts. A solemn example of this is found in John 11:47, 48.

"If they shall fall away". The Greek word here is very strong and emphatic, even stronger than the one used in Matthew 7:27, where it is said of the house built on the sand, "and great was the fall thereof". It is a complete falling away, a total abandonment of Christianity which is here in view. It is a wilful turning of the back on God’s revealed truth, an utter repudiation of the Gospel. It is making "shipwreck of the faith" (1 Tim. 1:19). This terrible sin is not committed by a mere nominal professor, for he has nothing really to fall away from, save an empty name. The class here described are such as had had their minds enlightened, their consciences stirred, their affections moved to a considerable degree, and yet who were never brought from death unto life. Nor is it backsliding Christians who are in view. It is not simply "fall into sin", this or that sin. The greatest "sin" which a regenerated man can possibly commit is the personal denial of Christ: Peter was guilty of this, yet was he "renewed again unto repentance". It is the total renunciation of all the distinguishing truths and principles of Christianity, and this not secretly, but openly, which constitutes apostasy.

"If they shall fall away". "This is scarcely a fair translation. It has been said that the apostle did not here assert that such persons did or do ‘fall away’; but that if they did—a supposition which, however, could never be realized—then the consequence would be they could not be ‘renewed again unto repentance’. The words literally rendered are, ‘And have fallen away’, or, ‘yet have fallen’. The apostle obviously intimates that such persons might, and that such persons did, ‘fall away’. By ‘falling away’, we are plainly to understand what is commonly called apostasy. This does not consist in an occasional falling into actual sin, however gross and aggravated; nor in the renunciation of some of the principles of Christianity, even though those should be of considerable importance; but in an open, total, determined renunciation of all the constituent principles of Christianity, and a return to a false religion, such as that of unbelieving Jews or heathens, or to open infidelity and open godlessness" (Dr. J. Brown).

"It is impossible . . . if they fall away, to renew them again unto repentance". Four questions here call for answer. What is meant by "renewed unto repentance"? What is signified by "renewed again unto repentance"? Why is such an experience "impossible"? To whom is this "impossible"? Repentance signifies a change of mind: Matthew 21:29, Romans 11:29 establish this. It is more than a mental act, the conscience also being active, leading to contrition and self-condemnation (Job 42:6). In the unregenerate, it is simply the workings of nature; in the children of God it is wrought by the Holy Spirit. The latter is evangelical, being one of the things which "accompany salvation". The former is not so, being the "sorrow of the world", which "worketh death" (2 Cor. 7:10). This kind of "repentance" or remorse receives most solemn exemplification in the case of Judas: Matthew 27:3, 5. Such was the repentance of these apostates. The Greek verb for "renew" here occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. Probably "restore" had been better, for the same word is used in the Sept., for a Hebrews verb meaning to renew in the sense of restore: Psalm 103:5; 104:30; Lamentations 5:21. Josephus applies it to the renovation of the Temple!

But what is meant by "renewing unto repentance"? "To be ‘renewed’ is a figurative expression for denoting a change, a great change, and a change for the better. To be ‘renewed’ so as to change a person’s mind is expressive of an important and advantageous alteration of opinion, and character and service. And such an alteration the persons referred to had undergone at a former period. They were once in a state of ignorance respecting the doctrines and evidences of Christianity, and they had been ‘enlightened’. They had once known not of the excellency and beauty of Christian truth, and they had been made to ‘taste of the heavenly gift’. They once misunderstood the prophecies respecting the Messiah, and were unaware of their fulfillment, and, of course, were strangers to that energetic influence which the New Testament revelation puts forth; and they had been made to see that that ‘good word’ was fulfilled, and had been made partakers of the external privileges and been subjected to the peculiar energies of the new order of things. Their view, and feelings, and circumstances, were materially changed. How great the difference between an ignorant, bigoted Jew, and the person described in the preceding passage! He had become as it were a different man. He had not, indeed, become, in the sense of the apostle, a ‘new creature’, His mind had not been so changed as unfeignedly to believe ‘the truth as it is in Jesus’; but still, a great and so far as it went, a thorough change had taken place" (Dr. J. Brown).

Now it is impossible to "renew again unto repentance" those who have totally abandoned the Christian revelation. Some things are "impossible" with respect unto the nature of God, as that He cannot lie, or pardon sin without satisfaction to His justice. Other things which are possible to God’s nature are rendered "impossible" by His decrees or purpose: see 1 Samuel 15:28, 29. Still other things are "possible" or "impossible" with respect to the rule or order of all things God has appointed. For example, there cannot be faith apart from hearing the Word (Rom. 10:13-17). "When in things of duty God hath neither expressed command thereon, nor appointed means for the performance of them, they are to be looked upon then as impossible [as, for instance, there is no salvation apart from repentance, Luke 13:3. (A.W.P.)]; and then, with respect unto us, they are so absolutely, and so to be esteemed. And this is the ‘impossibility’ here principally intended. It is a thing that God hath neither commanded us to endeavor, nor appointed means to attain it, nor promise to assist us in it. It is therefore that which we have no reason to look after, attempt, or expect, as being not possible by any law, rule, or constitution of God.

"The apostle instructs us no further in the nature of future events but as our own duty is concerned in them. It is not for us either to look or hope, or pray for, or endeavor the restoration of such persons unto repentance. God gives a law unto us in these things, not unto Himself. It may be possible with God, for aught we know, if there be not a contradiction in it unto any of the holy properties of His nature; only He will not have us to expect any such thing from Him, nor hath He appointed any means for us to endeavor it. What He shall do we ought trustfully to accept; but our own duty toward such persons is absolutely at an end. And indeed, they put themselves wholly out of our reach" (Dr. John Owen).

It needs to be carefully observed that in the whole of this passage from Hebrews 5:11 onwards the apostle is speaking of his own ministry. In God’s hands, His servants are instruments by which He works and through whom He accomplishes His evangelical purpose. Thus Paul could properly say "I have begotten you through the gospel" (1 Cor. 4:15). And again, "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). So the servants of God had, through the preaching of the Gospel, "renewed unto repentance" those spoken of in Hebrews 6:4. But they had apostatised; they had totally repudiated the Gospel. It was therefore "impossible" for the servants of God to "renew them again unto repentance", for the all-sufficient reason that they had no other message to proclaim to them. They had no other Gospel in reserve, no further motives to present. Christ crucified had been set before them. Him they now denounced as an Imposter. There was "none other name" whereby they could be saved. Their public renunciation of Christ rendered their case hopeless so far as God’s servants were concerned. "Let them alone" (Matthew 15:19) was now their orders: compare Jude 22. Whether or not it was possible for God, consistently with His holiness, to shame them, our passage does not decide.

"Seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh" (verse 6). This is brought in to show the aggravation of their awful crime and the impossibility of their being renewed again unto repentance. By renouncing their Christian profession they declared Christ to be an Imposter. Thus they were irreclaimable. To attempt any further reasoning with them, would only be casting pearls before swine. With this verse should be carefully compared the parallel passage in Hebrews 10:26-29. These apostates had "received the knowledge of the truth", though not a saving knowledge of it. Afterward they sinned "wilfully": there was a deliberate and open disavowal of the truth. The nature of their particular sin is termed a "treading under foot the Son of God (something which no real Christian ever does) and counting (esteeming) the blood of the covenant an unholy thing", that is, looking upon the One who hung on the Cross as a common malefactor. For such there "remaineth no more sacrifice for sins". Their case is hopeless so far as man is concerned; and the writer believes, such are abandoned by God also.

"Seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame". "They thus identify themselves with His crucifiers—they entertained and avowed sentiments which were He on earth and in their power, would induce them to crucify Him. They exposed Him to infamy, made a public example of Him. They did more to dishonor Jesus Christ than His murderers did. They never professed to acknowledge His divine mission; but these apostates had made such a profession—they had made a kind of trial of Christianity, and, after trial, had rejected it" (Dr. J. Brown).

Such a warning was needed and well calculated to stir up the slothful Hebrews. Under the Old Testament economy, by means of types and prophecies, they had obtained glimmerings of truth as to Christ, called "the word of the beginning of Christ". Under those shadows and glimmerings they had been reared, not knowing their full import till they had been blessed with the full light of the Gospel, here called "perfection". The danger to which they were exposed was that of receding from the ground where Christianity placed them, and relaxing to Judaism. To do so meant to re-enter that House which Christ had left "desolate" (Matthew 23:38), and would be to join forces with His murderers, and thus "crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh", and by their apostasy "put Him to an open (public) shame". We may add that the Greek word here for "crucify" is a stronger one than is generally used: it means to "crucify up". Attention is thus directed to the erection of the cross on which the Savior was held up to public scorn.

Taking the passage as a whole, it needs to be remembered that all who had professed to receive the Gospel were not born of God: the parable of the Sower shows that. Intelligence might be informed, conscience searched, natural affections stirred, and yet there be "no root" in them. All is not gold that glitters. There has always been a "mixt multitude" (Ex. 12:38) who accompany the people of God. Moreover, there is in the real Christian the old heart, which is "deceitful above all things and desperately wicked", and therefore is he in constant need of faithful warning. Such, God has given in every dispensation: Genesis 2:17; Leviticus 26:15, 16; Matthew 3:8; Romans 11:21; 1 Corinthians 10:12.

Finally, let it be said that while Scripture speaks plainly and positively of the perseverance of the saints, yet it is a perseverance of saints, not unregenerate professors. Divine preservation is not only in a safe state, but also in a holy course of disposition and conduct. We are "kept by the power of God through faith". We are kept by the Spirit working in us a spirit of entire dependency, renouncing our own wisdom and strength. The only place from which we cannot fall is one down in the dust. It is there the Lord brings His own people, weaning them from all confidence in the flesh, and giving them to experience that it is when they are weak they are strong. Such, and such only, are saved and safe forever.

### vv. 4-6 The Twofold Working of the Spirit

In our last article we attempted little more than an explication of the terms used in Hebrews 6:4-6. Lack of space prevented us from throwing upon these verses the light which other portions of God’s Word affords, yet this is necessary if we are to form anything like a true and adequate conception of the particular characters which are there in view. One chief reason why students of Scripture continue to experience difficulty in ascertaining the meaning of any verse therein, is because they fail to prayerfully and patiently compare "spiritual things with spiritual" (1 Cor. 2:13). All of us are in far too much a hurry, and for this reason miss the best of what God has provided—true both of temporal and spiritual things. Probably few of our readers considered that we had succeeded in clearing away all the difficulties raised by this solemn passage, therefore the need of a further article thereon.

On the present occasion we propose to take up our passage more from a topical viewpoint than an expository, seeking (as God may be pleased to graciously enable) to open up more fully that in it which has caused the most trouble, namely, the precise relation of the Holy Spirit to the characters therein mentioned. They who "fall away" and whom it is "impossible to renew again unto repentance", are said to have been "made partakers of the Holy Spirit". We ask now, On what has the Spirit wrought? What was the character of His work toward them? How had they been made "partakers" of Him? To what extent? This leads us to point out that Scripture reveals a twofold working of God’s Spirit with men: with the elect, and with the non-elect. It is of the latter we shall here treat.

Concerning the Spirit’s work with the non-elect, we begin by enquiring, Upon what does He work? We answer, Upon the faculties of men’s souls. First, He works upon the understanding. There are in all men natural faculties of understanding, will, and affection. A man could not love God unless he had in him the faculty of affection—a stone could never love God! So a man could never understand spiritual things unless he had the faculty of understanding. With the elect, the Holy Spirit "renews" the understanding (Rom. 12:2 compared with Titus 3:5); but with the non-elect, He only enlightens or educates it. The understanding of fallen and unregenerate men, which is enlightened by the Spirit, is capable of knowing, in some measure, both the Godhead, and parts of His law. Let us give Scripture proof of this.

In Romans 1:18 we read of men who "hold the truth in unrighteousness", and what is there referred to is explained in what follows: "Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath showed unto them. For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made: His eternal power and Godhead" (verses 19, 20). The reference there, as the later verses show, is to the Heathen. Now what we would press upon the attention of the reader is, that in addition to poor fallen nature, God has granted to men a manifestation of Himself; that which "may be known of God", which He "hath showed unto them". It is not merely that creation reveals a Creator, but that the Creator has revealed Himself—"when they knew God" (verse 21), and that must have been by the Spirit’s enlightening their natural understanding.

Again, in Romans 2:14, 15 we read, "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law are a law unto themselves: Which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness". The Holy Spirit is speaking here of men according to "nature", not grace. In his natural heart there is written "the work of the law"—by whom but by the finger of God! Except for this, man would be destitute of moral light, for the Fall robbed him of all light.

The understanding in man, or the principle of reason, may, by education and contact with others, be developed to a considerable extent, so that a man may become exceeding wise; nevertheless, his knowledge and wisdom is only natural, even though his understanding be exercised upon supernatural objects. But let now the light of reason and the light of conscience be brought to the Scriptures for instruction, and man’s knowledge will be much further increased, yet still his light is but natural, it rises not to the level of what grace produces. Proof of this is seen in the case of the Jews: "Behold, thou art called a Jew, and restest in the law, and makest thy boast of God; and knowest His will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law; and are confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness" (Rom. 2:17-19). How like thousands of unregenerate souls in Christendom today!

From the last-quoted passage we learn what is the effect of the light of nature (reason) being brought to the law of God: it is increased and improved. As we have seen above, a man has some light by nature that there is a God; let that light be brought to Scripture, and he becomes "confident" there is. A man by nature has some light about the duties which God requires of him; let him bring that light to the Scriptures and he will have "the form (systematized) of knowledge, and of the truth in the law" (Rom. 2:20). When the understanding of the natural man is illumined by the Scriptures, his light is both ratified and added unto, yet is it still natural light which he has; it is but the educating of his natural reason.

Second, the Holy Spirit works upon the affections of the natural man. There is in fallen man a natural devotion to a deity. This is evidenced by the fact that practically all of the heathen worship some god or other. In Acts 13:50 we read of "devout women" being stirred up against Paul and Barnabas: they had a devotion in them which is common to mankind. Now let men bring their natural devotion to the Scriptures and they will come to know of the true God, and learn to reverence Him too; yet is that only nature improved. Through the Word, the Holy Spirit may (usually, does) convince its reader that the Maker of heaven and earth is the true God, and therefore worthy of honor and homage. The fact is, though very few indeed recognize it, the identical principle which causes a Hindu to worship Buddha, causes the Anglo-Saxon to worship the Father of Jesus Christ.

Again; there is in every sinner the natural recognition that his sins deserve eternal death, and that God, unless He be appeased, will punish him. Doubtless many of our readers will feel inclined to call into question this last statement; let our appeal again be to the Word of Truth. There we read, "Who, knowing the judgment of God, that they might commit such things are worthy of death" (Rom. 1:32). That, be it noted, is said of the heathen. No bring one having such knowledge to the law of God, and what will follow? This, "But we are sure that the judgment of God is according to truth against them which commit such things" (Rom. 2:2). There it is the Jews speaking. The natural man enlightened from the Word has his conviction deepened.

Again, if a man is conscious of his sins, and realizes that the justice of God calls for their punishment, is it not natural for him to think next of a mediator, to desire someone to intercede for him with God? Such a concept is by no means a sure evidence of regeneration. This too is found in mere nature. Every heathen religion, with the propitiatory offerings which are brought to their gods, exemplifies it. Romanism with its mediating priests demonstrates the same fact in this land. Illustrations are also to be found in the Holy Scriptures. When Pharaoh was convicted of his sins, he entreated Moses to intercede for him (Ex. 10:16, 17). So too wicked Simon Magus desired Peter to pray for him (Acts 8:24).

Once more; there is in the heart of every natural man a desire for happiness, and for a greater happiness than this poor world can provide. It is plainly evident that man rests not in anything down here, for like a bee which goes from one flower to another, so the heart of man cannot be satisfied with any earthly object. When Balaam saw the blessedness of God’s people, he exclaimed, "Let me die the death of the righteous" (Num. 23:10). The most abandoned wretch does not want to go to hell, and to the very end he hopes that he will be taken to heaven.

So, likewise, is the matter of believing that a man really is a child of God. There is such self-love and self-flattery in the fallen heart that if an unregenerate man hears, out of the Word of God, the good news that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, he at once concludes that he is the man God will honor, as wicked Haman imagined that he was the man king Ahasuerus would honor. So when the Holy Spirit has terrified a man’s conscience, by giving it a sight of sin before a holy God, when he learns about remission of sins through Christ, he at once fondly imagines that his own sins are pardoned. Alas, in the vast majority of cases it has to be said, "the pride of thine heart hath deceived thee" (Obad. 3).

Now let us take note of how the Holy Spirit may work upon there natural principles of the human soul, mightily raising them, and yet not changing a man’s heart. Just as the rays of the sun shining upon plants in a garden adds no new nature to them, but serves to aid their best development, so the Holy Spirit when He deals with the reprobate communicates nothing new to them, yet raises their natural faculties to their highest point. The principles or faculties of man’s soul are capable of being wrought upon without the impartation of regenerating grace. As we have seen, man’s understanding is illuminated by the light of conscience, but let the Holy Spirit—without imparting a new eye—still further enlighten that conscience, bring before it the exalted claims of the thrice holy God, and its knowledge will be greatly increased. Nevertheless, this educated conscience falls far below the level of the spiritual discernment possessed by one who has been brought out of death into life. Let us particularize:

1. The Spirit restrains the Corruptions of men.

In Genesis 20:6 we read of how God bound the lust of Abimeleck when Sarah was at his mercy, "I also withheld thee from sinning against Me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her". So in 2 Peter 2:20 we read of some "having escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ", yet from what follows in the next two verses it is clear they were never regenerated. There the apostle uses the similitude of a sow being washed from her filth, and being kept for a while, after she is washed, from going back again into the mire; yet is there no changing or "renewing" of the swine’s nature.

Contrast now what is said of the Lord’s people in 2 Peter 1:3, 4, "According as His Divine power hath given unto us all things pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him that that hath called us to glory and virtue: Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises; that by these ye might be partakers of the Divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust". In 2 Peter 2:20, the Greek word for the "pollutions" of the world, signifies the gross and outward defilements into which the irreligious run; but in 2 Peter 1:4, the regenerated are said to have escaped "the corruption" that is in the world through lust or "desire", i.e. the inward disposition toward evil. Moreover, the Lord’s people are made "partakers of the Divine nature", which means, the Divine image is stamped upon them: "life and godliness" are seen in them.

Again; in the similitude used in 2 Peter 2:20, the apostle likens those who have known "the way of righteousness" to a dog that has been made sick, but which turns to its own vomit again. The figure is very striking and forcible. When the Holy Spirit brings the Word of God to bear upon an unregenerate man’s conscience, he is made sick at heart. Of Christians it is said, "For ye have not received the Spirit of bondage again to fear" (Rom. 8:15), but to the non-elect He often becomes a Spirit of "bondage" by binding their sins upon their conscience. Whereas before they had a glimmering light that the judgment of God is against sinners, their conscience now is set on fire, and the temporary consequence is that sins are refused with loathing, vomited out. Yet, like a dog, such a one loves them still, and ultimately returns thereto.

2. The Spirit causes men to turn naturally toward the Redeemer.

When conscience is wrought upon by a few sparks of God’s wrath falling upon it, what saith the soul next? This, O for a physician! There is, as we have pointed out above, a natural principle in men which causes them to make use of a mediator unto God—a witch-doctor, a priest, or a preacher, as the case may be. Now a man who has lived under the sound of the Gospel learns that Christ is the one Mediator. Scriptural education has taught him this, just as the heathen education teaches a Turk that Mahomet is the one mediator. And, by the same principle that Agrippa believed Moses and the prophets, the unregenerate "Christian" (?) believes in Christ. Nay further, the light of the Spirit shining upon him, as the sun on the plants, develops his natural understanding and causes him to now remember that Redeemer which before he ignored.

A scripture clearly to the point of what we have just said above is Psalm 78:34, 35, "When He slew them, then they sought Him: and they returned and enquired early after God. And they remembered that God was their Rock, and the high God their Redeemer". Yet what immediately follows? This, "Nevertheless they did flatter Him with their mouth". And what signifies this "flattering"? Why, they sought Him merely out of self-love, simply because they felt their very lives were in imminent danger. There is a seeking out of friendship, out of love to the object. But if one seek unto an enemy because he hath need of him, that is but "flattery" or self-love. So if sinful man feels he is in extremity, if his conscience remains sick, mere nature will call for the Physician.

Self-love is the predominant principle in the natural man: he loves himself more than he loves God; it is this which lies at the root of depravity and sin. Now when a man’s conscience is convicted so that he perceives his need of a physician, and recognizes that happiness comes from Christ, such good news appeals to his self-love. Satan, who knows human nature so well was right when he said, "skin for skin yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life" (Job 2:4). Make the self-love of the natural man conscious of the wrath of God, and he is ready to "accept Christ", or do anything else which the preacher bids him; yet that is only the workings of nature, he is still unregenerate.

When the storm arose and threatened to sink the ship in which Jonah lay asleep we read, "Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god"; then the captain awoke Jonah and said. "Arise, call upon thy God, if so be God will think upon us that we perish not" (Heb. 1:5,6). So a conscience terrified by the prospect of Hell, will cause a man to seek Christ after a natural way. It is but the instinct of self-preservation at work. Add to this, the craving for happiness which self-love ever seeks, and hearing that such happiness is to be found only in Christ, little wonder that multitudes seek Him now for what they can get from Him, as of old they sought Him for the sake of the loaves and fishes.

In John 6:33, we are told that Christ announced, "For the bread of God is He which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world". What was their response? This, "Then they said unto Him, Lord, evermore give us this bread". Yet their eager request sprang not from a renewed heart, but from the corrupt spring of self-love. Proof of this is found in the immediate sequel. In verse 36 the Lord tells them plainly, ye "believe not". In verse 41 we are told that they "murmured at Him". Yet that very same people said to the Lord, "Evermore give us this Bread"! Ah, all is not gold that glitters.

An enlightened understanding, moved by self-love, is prepared to take up Divine duties never practiced before, yea, to walk in the commandments of God. This was demonstrated plainly at Sinai. When Jehovah appeared before Israel in His awesome majesty, and their conscience was smitten by His manifested holiness, they said to Moses, "Go thou near, and hear all that the Lord our God shall say; and speak thou unto us all that the Lord our God shall speak unto thee; and we will hear and do". They were prepared to receive and obey the Lord’s statutes. Yet mark what God said of them, "Oh, that there were such a heart in them, that they would fear Me, and keep all My commandments always". They still lacked the principle of regeneration!

3. The Spirit elevates the natural faculties of man.

Just as the shining of the sun causes plants to grow higher and fruits to be sweeter than would be the case were the heavens to remain cloudy and overcast, so the Spirit works upon the faculties of the unregenerate and causes them to bring forth that which left to themselves they would not produce. Or, just as fire will raise the temperature and level of water, causing it to bubble up and ascend in steam, though the principle of heat is in the fire and not in the water, for when the fire is withdrawn the water returns to its natural coldness again; so the Spirit enlightens the understandings of the non-elect, stirs their affections, and moves their wills to action, without communicating a new principle to them, without regenerating them.

He elevates the understanding. In Numbers 24:2 we read that the Spirit of God came upon Balaam, the consequence of which he has told us: "The man who had his eyes shut, but now opened, hath said: he hath said, which heard the words of God, which saw the vision of the Almighty, falling but having his eyes opened: How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, thy tabernacles, O Israel!" (verses 3-5). Thus Balaam had a vision of the Almighty, and perceived the blessed estate of His people; yet was he still unregenerate!

He elevates the affections. In 1 Samuel 11:1-3 we read of how the enemies of Jehovah insulted His people. Then we are told, "And the Spirit of God came upon Saul when he heard these tidings, and his anger was kindled greatly" (verse 6). That was holy indignation, yet it proceeded from a reprobate! As the winds blowing upon the sea will, at times, raise its waters to a great height, so the Spirit, under a faithful sermon, will blow upon the affections of the unregenerate, and elevate them to nobler objects and occupations. Yet, He stops short of making them new creatures in Christ Jesus.

Again; as we have seen, there is in man a natural desire for real happiness, hence, when Christ is presented in the Gospel, many receive Him "with joy"; yet, are they, for the most part, but stony-ground hearers, destitute of any root of vital godliness (Matthew 13:20, 21). Nature may be so raised by the light which the Holy Spirit brings to it, that unregenerate men may taste of the heavenly gift, Christ, see John 4:10. So too they are enabled to taste of the "powers of the world to come". As in their conscience, they get a taste of Hell, and so know for a certainty that there is a Hell, the same natural principle which desires a happiness which is beyond this world, is confirmed and comforted when they have a "taste" of what belongs to the world to come.

He elevates the will and sets it to work in the way of obedience to God. The Holy Spirit is the Author of all moral and civil righteousness which there is in the world. The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus to issue a proclamation for the building of His house (Ezra 1:1, 2); and He also moved Caiaphas to prophesy of Christ (John 11:51). Of wicked Herod we read that, when he heard John "he did many things, and heard him gladly" (Mark 6:20). And God will be no man’s Debtor: every act of obedience, performed by him in obedience to His Word, shall be rewarded: a temporary joy shall be the portion of such. The tragic thing is that so many conclude from such an experience that they are in a state of grace, and therefore become loud in their professions of assurance, being fully persuaded that they are really born-again persons.

Now we trust that what has been said will enable some of our readers to understand the better what is found in Hebrews 6:4-6. One eminent commentator suggested that these verses describe neither the regenerate nor the unregenerate, but a third condition, midway between; because there must be a third state between that of mere nature and that of supernatural grace. Nor are we at all surprised that he arrived at this conclusion. Few indeed have perceived the force of 1 Corinthians 12:6, "And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all".

There are operations of the Spirit upon men’s hearts which are above nature, which are works of Divine power, which produces that in and from unregenerate men which leads multitudes of them to fondly imagine that they have been actually born again, and yet this work of the Spirit falls far short of that "exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward who believe" (Eph. 1:19). Hebrews 6:4-6 supplies a most striking example of this, for there we have men who are made "partakers of the Holy Spirit". There we see a work which is above nature, for they taste of the "heavenly Gift". It is a work of power, for they taste of the "powers of the world to come". As 1 Corinthians 12:4 tells us, "There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit". And why is this? 1 Corinthians 12:11 answers, "But all these worketh that one and the self-same Spirit, dividing to every man severally as He will": He proportions His power as He pleases, to an inferior or a superior work. Note carefully, there are "good gifts" from above, as well as "perfect gifts" (James 1:17)!

Of old Jehovah said, "My Spirit shall not always strive with man" (Gen. 6:3). There we find the Spirit putting forth power upon man, for He "strives" with him; yet, not in the fullness of His power, or it had not been resisted. In other cases He puts forth power and men yield thereto (as did Balaam), yet is that power simply directed to the winding up of man’s natural faculties to their greatest height, and comes far short of regenerating them. This is clearly illustrated in the parable of the Sower. There is the stony-ground hearer, who received the Word with joy, yet falls away in time of persecution. There is also the thorny-ground hearer, who withstands persecution, and brings forth fruit, yet not "to perfection". And both of them represent unregenerate souls.

And why does God put forth His power upon the reprobate, yet not the "exceeding greatness" of His power? God has seen well to test men in various ways. First, He gave them the light of nature, the work of the law written in their hearts, augmented by the light of conscience—a light which enabled men to know there was a God and of their duties toward Him. And Socrates, who knew nothing of the Scriptures, went so far as to die for the truth that there was One God. But this light of nature did not regenerate men, nor enable them to bring forth the fruit of the Spirit.

Again; He tried the Jews with His Law. He would make it evident how far the light of nature, improved by the light of His Law, would go. And let it not be forgotten that of Israel under the Law it is said. "Thou gavest also Thy good Spirit to instruct them" (Nehemiah 9:20). Nevertheless, the law was "weak through the flesh" (Rom. 8:3): it could not bring forth that which was truly spiritual. And just as God gave Socrates as the highest product of what the light of nature could produce, so He gave Saul of Tarsus—a man who walked blamelessly (Phil. 3:6)—as the highest product under the Law.

But now He is trying men with the Gospel, to show how far human nature as such can go. That Gospel is accompanied with the Spirit, and Hebrews 6:4-6 shows us the highest point which can be attained under it, by man in the flesh. He may be enlightened, renewed unto repentance, enjoy the Word of God, be made a partaker of the Holy Spirit, and yet apostatize and perish forever. So too the same characters are said to have "done despite unto the Spirit of grace" (Heb. 10:26). The tragic thing is that the vast majority in Christendom look upon these inferior workings of the Spirit as evidence of His new-creating grace.

And what, we may enquire, is God’s purpose in these secondary operations of His Spirit? It is manifold. We can barely mention the leading designs. First, it is to exhibit the excellency of Grace. Every thing in nature hath either its counterfeit or counterfoil. If there are stationary stars, there are also shooting stars. If there are precious stones, there are pebbles which closely resemble yet differ widely from them. The one serves to set off the other. So there is a natural faith—"Many believed in His name when they saw the miracles which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself unto them" (John 2:23, 24); "The demons believe" (James 2:19)—and there is a supernatural faith, "the faith of God’s elect" (Titus 1:1), called "precious faith" (2 Pet. 1:1)! So there are common operations of the Spirit, and special operations; inferior workings upon the flesh, and superior workings that beget "spirit" (John 3:6). By virtue of this contrast, God says to each of His elect, See how much I have wrought on mere nature in the reprobate! yet it was not grace; I might have done no more for you, but I showed the "exceeding greatness of My power" (Eph. 1:19) toward you.

Second, to show the depravity of human nature. No matter under what trial God places man, that which is born of the flesh remains naught but flesh. The Law was weak through the flesh; so too is the Gospel, notwithstanding the shining of God’s Spirit upon men. The conscience may be convicted, the understanding enlightened, the affections raised, and the will moved, yet it still remains true that "every man at his best state is altogether vanity" (Ps. 39:5). Men may be instructed in the truth, believe in the living God, "accept Christ as their personal Savior", contend for the faith once delivered to the saints, and pass among men for devout Christians, yet be no better than "whited sepulchers, full of dead men’s bones".

Third, to place bounds upon sin. The general workings of God’s Spirit upon the reprobate serve to curb the risings of man’s corrupt nature. As it is His presence here upon earth which hinders the full manifestation of the mystery of iniquity in the appearing of the anti-Christ (2 Thess. 2), so His operations upon the non-elect prevent many outbursts of wickedness. In the time of Israel’s apostasy the Holy Spirit (the "glory") withdrew gradually, stage by stage (Ezek. 11), so as the apostasy of Christendom increases, the restraining operations of the Spirit are decreasing and hence the rising tide of lawlessness.

Fourth, to afford protection for the elect. God’s flock is only "the little" one (Luke 12:32), very, very much smaller than is commonly supposed. Christ Himself declared that only "FEW" are in the Narrow Way which leadeth "unto life" (Matthew 7:14). Nor must Revelation 7:9 be made to contradict these clear passages; instead, the "great multitude which no man could number" is to be compared with and interpreted by the expressions found in Judges 6:5, 7:12; 2 Chronicles 12:3; Joel 1:6. Now suppose that only the elect had been reformed by the Gospel, and all the rest of the world had remained in utter enmity against it, then the fruits of the Gospel had been too bare, being without leaves. The leaves of a tree, though not fit for the table, are serviceable to the fruit, and ornamental to the tree, for without them the fruit would be exposed to ripen on bare twigs.

An acknowledgement of the doctrine of the Gospel, where it is not accompanied by regeneration of heart, may indeed be suitably compared to the leaves of a tree which shelter and protect the fruit. Thus they are serviceable, though not valuable in God’s account. The leaf of the vine does more good to the grapes against a scorching sun, than the leaf of any other fruit tree—how much we may learn from God’s creatures if only we have eyes to see! So God’s elect have been outwardly shaded by the multitude of nominal Christians around them. For this we may well thank the kind providence of our Lord. Moreover, God has rewarded the doctrinal faith of the great crowd of unregenerate professors by preserving our public liberties, which the little handful of the regenerate could never, humanly speaking, have enjoyed, without the others.

Again; the operations of the Spirit upon the reprobate have shamed the wicked, increased sobriety, promoted morality, and caused nominal professors to support externally the preaching of the Gospel, the carrying on of the ministry, and thus providing for the benefit of common hearers. This is all useful in its season, but will reap no reward in eternity. The writer most seriously doubts if there be a single church on earth today, having in it sufficient of God’s elect to support a preacher, were all the unregenerate in it excluded. Yea, most probably, most of God’s own sent-servants, would be so completely dismayed if they could but see into the hearts of those who have a name to live and are dead, that they would be in despair. Yet though we cannot see into the hearts of professors, we can form an accurate idea of what is in them, for "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh". And the worldliness and emptiness of the ordinary speech of the majority shows plainly Who is not in their hearts.

We sincerely trust and earnestly pray that it may please our God to strike terror into the souls of many who read this article, that their false peace may be disturbed, and their worthless profession be exposed. Should some of the more thoughtful exclaim with the apostles, "Who then can be saved"? we answer in the words of our Lord, "With men this is impossible" (Matthew 19:26). Conclusive proof is this, my reader, that no sinner can be saved by any act of his own; and faithfulness requires us to tell you frankly that if your hope of Heaven is resting upon your act of "accepting Christ", then your house is built upon the sand. But blessed be His name, the Redeemer went on to say, "But with God all things are possible". "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jon. 2:9), not of the creature (Rom. 9:16). Then marvel not that Christ said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

### vv. 7-8 The Two Classes of Professors

Our preceding article was entitled "The Twofold Working of the Spirit". This was suggested by the contents of the first six verses of Hebrews 6. In them we find persons belonging to two entirely different classes are spoken of. The former, one in whom a work of Divine grace had been wrought, effectually applying to them the "great salvation" of God. The latter, one upon whom a work of Divine grace was also wrought, transforming its objects to a considerable degree, yet falling short of actually regenerating them. "The Lord is good to all: and His tender mercies are over all His works" (Ps. 145:9), but the richness of His "mercy" is reserved for the objects of His great love (Eph. 2:4). So too God puts forth His power in varying degrees, proportioned to the work which He has before Him. Thus, Christ referred to His casting out of demons "with the finger of God" (Luke 11:20). Speaking to Israel, Moses said, "With a strong hand hath the Lord brought thee out of Egypt" (Ex. 13:9). When referring to the amazing miracle of the Divine incarnation Mary said, "He hath showed strength with His arm" (Luke 1:51). But when Paul prayed that God would enlighten His saints to apprehend His stupendous miracle of grace in salvation, it was that they might know "the exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward".

God’s power was put forth and is displayed in the natural creation (Rom. 1:20). It will be made known in Hell, upon the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction (Rom. 9:22). It is exercised upon the reprobate in this life (in some more than in others, according to His sovereign pleasure) in subduing their corruptions, restraining their sins, reforming their characters, causing them to receive the doctrine of the Gospel. But the greatest excellency and efficacy of His power is reserved for His beloved people. His power toward them is such that it exceedeth all our thoughts: "Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us" (Eph. 3:20).

The recognition of only one of the two distinct operations of God’s Spirit upon men has divided theologians into two opposing camps. On the one hand, are the Arminians, who insist that Scripture teaches a common grace of God toward all men, a grace which may be despised. So far they are right, for Jude 4 expressly speaks of a class who turn "the grace of our God into lasciviousness". But they err when they teach there is no special grace, which is always efficacious upon those in whom it works. On the other side, the majority of modem Calvinists (the older ones did not) deny a common grace of God to all men, and insist in distinguishing grace to the elect only. In this they are wrong, and hence their unsatisfactory interpretations of Hebrews 6:4-6 and 10:26.

Now as we have shown in our last article, James 1:17 tells us "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above" etc. Two distinct "gifts" are here referred to. Scripture draws a clear line of distinction between that which God calls "good", and that which He designates "perfect". The main difference between them being that, usually, "good" is applied to something which is temporal, "perfect" to that which is spiritual. The operations of the Spirit upon the non-elect produces that which is "good", that which accomplishes a useful purpose in time, that which is serviceable to God’s elect. But His operations upon the children of God produces that which is "perfect", i.e. spiritual, supernatural, eternal. The difference between these two classes and their relation to God in time, was clearly foreshadowed in the Old Testament. The commonwealth of Israel was the type of Christendom as a whole; the "remnant according to the election of grace" in Israel (Rom. 11:5), represented the regenerated people of God now. Hence in both the Tabernacle and the Temple there were two distinct grades of worshippers; so there are today. Those who are merely nominal Christians are the outer-court worshippers; the regenerated Christians, who have been made "kings and priests unto God" (Rev. 1:6), worship in the holy place (Heb. 10:19). Both classes are contemplated in Hebrews 6.

In the short passage which is to be before us on this present occasion, the apostle sums up and makes a searching application of all that he has been writing about in the preceding verses, and this in the form of a parable or similitude. In the context two different classes of people are viewed, though at first it is by no means easy to distinguish between them, the reason for this being that they have so much in common. They had both enjoyed the same external privileges, had been enlightened under the same Gospel ministry, had alike been made "partakers of the Holy Spirit", and had all made a good profession. Yet, of the second class it had to be said, as Christ said to the young ruler, "One thing thou lackest", namely, the shedding abroad of God’s love in their hearts, evidenced by leaving all and following Christ.

The first class is addressed in the opening verses of our chapter, where the apostle bids the truly regenerated people of God "Go on unto perfection", i.e. having left the temporal shadows, seek to apprehend that for which they had been apprehended—live in the power and enjoyment of the spiritual, supernatural, and eternal. This, the apostle had said, "will we do, if God permit" (verse 3). Divine enablement was needed if they were to "possess their possessions" (Obad. 1:17), for the regenerate are just as dependent upon God as are the unregenerate. The second class are before us in verses 4-6, where we have described the principal effects which the common operations of the Spirit produce upon the natural faculties of the human soul. Though those faculties be wound up to their highest pitch, yet the music which they produce is earthly not heavenly, human not Divine, fleshly not spiritual, temporal not eternal. Consequently, they are still liable to apostatize, and even though they should not, they are certain to perish eternally.

The apostle’s design in this 6th chapter was to exhort the Hebrews to progress in the Christian course (verses 1-3), and to persevere therein (verses 12-20). The first exhortation is presented in verse 1 and qualified in verse 3. The motive to obedience is drawn from the danger of apostacy: (verses 4-6, note the opening "for"). His purpose in referring to this second class (of unregenerate professors, who apostatize) was, to warn against the outcome of a continuance in a state of slothfulness. Here in the similitude found in verses 6,7, he continues and completes the same solemn line of thought, showing what is the certain and fearful doom of all upon whom a regenerating work of grace is not wrought. First, however, he describes the blessedness of the true people of God.

"For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it and bringeth forth herbs meet for them for whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God; But that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned" (verses 7,8). In taking up these verses we shall endeavor to give, first, an interpretation of them; second, make an application of their contents. The interpretation respects, in its direct and local reference the Jews, or rather, two classes among the Jews; the application belongs to all who come under the sound of the Gospel.

The two verses quoted above are designed to illustrate and confirm the solemn admonition found in the six preceding verses, therefore are they introduced with the word "for". In the context two classes of people are in view, both of which were, according to the flesh, Jews. This we have sought to establish in our previous expositions. With the first class the apostle identified himself, note the "we" in verse 3; from the second class Paul dissociates himself, note the words "those" in verse 4 and "they" in verse 6. So, too, two different pieces of ground are now described: first, fruitful ground, which depicts those who have been truly regenerated, and who in consequence, had received the Word into good and honest hearts. Second, unfruitful ground, which represents that class against whose sin and doom the apostle was warning the Hebrews; namely, those who, however great their privileges and fair their professions, bring forth only thorns and briers, who, being rejected by God, are overtaken with swift and terrible destruction.

"For the earth which drinketh in the rain". The prime reference is to the Jewish nation. They were God’s vineyard (see Isaiah 5:7,8; Jeremiah 2:21 etc.). It was unto them God had sent all His servants, the prophets, and last of all His Son (see Matthew 21:35-37). The "rain" here signifies the Word, or Doctrine which the Lord sent unto Israel: "My doctrine shall drop as the rain" (Deut. 32:2 and cf. Isaiah 55:10, 11). Note how when Ezekiel was to prophesy or preach, his message would "drop" as the rain does (Ezek. 21:2 and cf. Amos 7:16). The figure is very beautiful. The rain is something which no man can manufacture, nor is the Word of human origin. Rain comes down from above, so is the Gospel a heavenly gift. The rain refreshes vegetation, and causes it to grow, so too the Doctrine of God revives His people and makes them fruitful. The rain quickens living seeds in the ground, though it imparts no life to dead ones; so the Word is the Spirit’s instrument for quickening God’s elect (John 3:5; James 1:18), who previously had (federal) life in Christ.

There is nothing in nature that God assumes the more into His own prerogative than the giving of rain. The first reference to it in Scripture is as follows, "For the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth" (Gen. 2:5). All rain is from God, who gives or withholds it at His pleasure. The sending of rain He appeals to as a great pledge of His promises and goodness: "Nevertheless He left not Himself without witness, in that He did good, and gave us rain from heaven" etc. (Acts 14:17). Whatever conclusions men may draw from the commonness of it, and however they may imagine they are acquainted with its causes, nevertheless God distinguishes Himself from all the idols of the world in that none of them can give rain: "Are there any among the vanities of the Gentiles that can cause rain?" (Jer. 14:22). Hence the prophet said, "Let us now fear the Lord our God, that giveth rain" (Jer. 5:24).

The high sovereignty of God is also exhibited in the manner of His bestowal and non-bestowal of rain: "Also I have withholden the rain from you, when there were yet three months to the harvest: and I caused it to rain upon one city, and caused it not to rain upon another city: one piece was rained upon, and the piece whereon it rained not withered" (Amos 4:7). Thus it is absolutely in connection with His providential sending of the Gospel to nations, cities, and individuals: it is of God’s disposal alone, and He exercises a distinguishing authority thereon. "Now when they had gone throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia, and were forbidden of the Holy Spirit to preach the Word in Asia, After they were come to Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not" (Acts 16:6, 7). God sends His Gospel to one nation and not to another, to one city and not to another—there are many large towns both in England and the United States where there is no real Gospel preached today—and at one season and not at another.

The natural is but a shadowing forth of the spiritual. What a contrast was there between Egypt (figure of the world), and Canaan (type of the Church)! "For the land, whither thou goest in to possess it, is not as the land of Egypt, from whence ye came out, where thou sowedst thy seed, and waterest with thy foot, as a garden of herbs. But the land, whither ye go to possess it, is a land of hills and valleys, and drinketh water of the rain of heaven: A land which the Lord thy God careth for; the eyes of the Lord thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year unto the end of the year... I will give you the rain of your land in his due season, the first rain and the latter rain" (Deut. 11:11, 12, 14). Thus,—there were two special wet seasons: the first in October (the beginning of Israel’s year), when their seed was cast into the ground: the other in March when their corn was nearly grown. Hence we read, "Jordan overfloweth all his banks all the time of harvest" (Josh. 3:15, and cf. 1 Chronicles 12:15). Besides these, were many "showers" (Ps. 65:10).

"The rain that cometh oft upon it". The reference is to the repeated and frequent ministerial showers with which God visited Israel. To them He had called, "O earth, earth, earth, hear the Word of the Lord!" (Jer. 22:29). It was looking back to these multiplied servants which Jehovah had sent to His ancient people that Christ said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together" (Matthew 23:37). This then was the "earth" in which were the plants of God’s husbandry.

In what follows to the end of the passage the apostle distributes the plants into two classes: "herbs" (verse 7), "thorns and briers" (verse 8). The former, represent those who, having believed and obeyed the Gospel, brought forth the fruits of practical godliness. These constituted that "remnant according to the election of grace" (Rom. 11:5), which obtained mercy, when the rest of their brethren according to the flesh were blinded. These still continued to be the vineyard of the Lord, a field which He cared for. They formed the first Gospel church, gathered out from the Hebrews, which brought forth fruit to the glory of God, and was blessed by Him. The latter, were made up of obstinate unbelievers on the one hand, who persistently rejected Christ and His Gospel; and on the other hand, of those who embraced the profession of the Gospel, but after a season returned again to Judaism. These were rejected of God, fell under His curse and perished.

"And bringeth forth herbs". Several have noted the close resemblance which our present passage bears to the parable of the Sower, recorded in the Gospels. There are some notable parallels between them; the one of most importance being, to observe that in both places we have men looked at, not from the standpoint of God’s eternal counsels (as for example, Ephesians 1:3-11), but according to human responsibility. The earth which receives the rain, is a figure of the hearts and minds of the Jews, to whom the Word of God had been sent, and to whom, in the days of Christ and His apostles, the Gospel had been preached. So our Lord compared His hearers unto several sorts of ground into which the seed is cast—observe how the word "dressed" or "tilled" presupposes the seed. What response, then, will the earth make to the repeated rains? or, to interpret the figure, What fruit is brought forth by those who heard the Gospel? That is the particular aspect of truth the Holy Spirit here has before Him.

"And bringeth forth herbs". The verb here properly signifies the bringing forth of a woman that hath conceived with child, cf. Luke 1:31. So here the earth is said to bring forth as from a womb impregnated, the rains causing the seeds to issue in fruit. The Greek word for "herbs" occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. It appears to be a general term for vegetables and cereals. It is found frequently in the Sept. as the equivalent of the Hebrews "eseb", which has the same extensive meaning. Now just as the cultivator of land has a right to expect that, under the providential blessings of God, his toils shall be rewarded, that the seed he has sown and the ground he has tilled, should yield an increase, so had Jehovah the right to expect fruit from Israel: "And He looked that it (His vineyard) should bring forth grapes" (Isa. 5:4).

"Meet for them by whom it is dressed". The Greek may be rightly rendered thus: equally so, as in the margin, "for whom" it is dressed: either makes good sense. "By whom" would look to the actual cultivator; "for whom," the proprietor. The apostle’s design here is to show the importance of making a proper use of receiving God’s Word: a "meet" or suitable response should be forthcoming. The ministry of the Gospel tests the state of the hearts of those to whom it comes, just as the fallen rain does the ground which receives it; tests it by exhibiting its character from what is brought forth by it. As it is in nature, so it is in grace; the more frequently the rain falls, and the more the ground be cultivated, the better and heavier should be the yield. Thus it is with God’s elect. The more they sit under the ministry of the Word, and the more they seek grace to improve what they hear, the more fruit will they yield unto God. Thus it had been with the godly in Israel.

"Receiveth blessing from God." The "blessing" here is not antecedent in the communication of mercies, for that we have at the beginning of the verse; rather is it a consequent upon the bringing forth of "herbs" or fruit. What we have here is God’s acceptation and approbation, assuring His care unto a further improvement: "A vineyard of red wine: I the Lord do keep it; I will water it every moment; lest any hurt it, I will keep it night and day" (Isa. 27:2, 3). Three things then are included in God’s blessing of this fruitful field: First, His owning of it: He is not ashamed to acknowledge it as His. Second, His watch-care over it, His pruning of the branches that they may bring forth more fruit (John 15:2). Third, His final preservation of it from evil, as opposed to the destruction of barren ground. All this was true of that part of Israel spoken of in Romans 11:5.

"But that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected" (verse 8). It is important to note that in the similitude there is a common subject of the whole, which is then divided into two parts, with very different events ascribed unto each. The common subject is "the earth," of the nature whereof both parts are equally participant. Originally, and naturally, they differ not. On this common subject, on both parts or branches of it, the "rain" equally falls. And too both are equally "dressed." The difference between them lies, first, in what each part of "the earth" (Israel) produced; and secondly, God’s dealings with each part. As we have seen, the one part brought forth "herbs" meet for the dresser or owner: a suitable response was made to the rain given and the care expended upon it. The other, which we are now to look at, is the very reverse.

"But that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected." Everything here is in sharp antithesis from the terms of the preceding verse. There, the good ground, "bringeth forth", the Greek word signifying a natural conception and production of anything in due order and season. But the evil ground "beareth" thorns and briers, the Greek verb signifying an unnatural and monstrous production, a casting out in abundance of that which is not only without the use of means, but actually against it. As God said of His Israelitish vineyard, "He looketh that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes" (Isa. 5:2). The Greek for "thorns and briers" is identical with the Sept. rendering of Genesis 3:18, which, in our Bibles, is rendered, "thorns and thistles". Three thoughts seem suggested by the term here given to the product of this evil ground. First, it brought forth that which was of no profit to its owner, that which promoted not the glory of God. Second, "thorns and briers" are of a hurtful and noxious nature: see Ezekiel 28:24, etc. Third, these terms tell us that all which is brought forth by the natural man is under the curse of God: Genesis 3:18, 4:11, 12.

"But that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected". Land which, after cultivation, brings forth only such products, is abandoned by the farmer as worthless. The Greek word here for "rejected", signifies the setting aside as useless after trial has been made of a thing. The application of it here is to by far the greater part of the Jewish people. First, Christ had warned them "the kingdom of God shall be taken from you and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matthew 21:43). Second, after their full and open rejection of Himself and His Gospel, Christ told them, "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate" (Matthew 23:38). Third, proof that the Nation as a whole had been "rejected" by God, is found in Acts 2:40, when, on the day of Pentecost, Peter bade the believing remnant, "Save yourselves from this untoward generation".

"And is nigh unto cursing". This is in sharp contrast from what was said of the good ground: "receiveth blessing from God". The word "cursing" here, means, "given over to execration", or "devoted to destruction". It was given over to be "burned", which, according to the analogy of faith, means, it would be visited with Divine judgment. Israel had become a barren tree, a cumberer of the ground, and the word had gone forth, "Cut it down"(Luke 12:7, 9). Further proof that Israel as a nation was given over to "execration", is found in the solemn incident of Christ’s cursing of the "fig tree" (Matthew 21:19), figure of the Jews, see Matthew 24:32. True, a short respite had been granted—another "year" (Luke 13:8)—hence the "nigh unto cursing".

"Whose end is to be burned". In Eastern lands, when a husbandman discovers that a piece of ground is worthless, he neglects it, abandons it. Next, he breaks down its fences, that it may be known it is outside the bounds of his possession. Finally, he sets fire to its weeds, to prevent their seeds being blown on to his good ground. Thus it was with Israel. In the last chapter of Acts we see how the apostle Paul warned the Jews how that God had set them aside (Acts 28:25-28), and shortly after, the solemn words of Christ in Matthew 22:7 were fulfilled, "He sent forth His armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city".

The contents of Hebrews 6:7, 8 are not to be restricted to the regenerated and unregenerated Jews, for "as in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man" (Prov. 27:19). "This is a similitude most appropriate to excite a desire to make progress in due time; for as the earth cannot bring forth a good crop in harvest except it causes the seed as soon as it is sown to germinate, so if we desire to bring forth good fruit, as soon as the Lord sows His Word, it ought to strike roots in us without delay; for it cannot be expected to fructify, if it be either choked or perish. But as the similitude is very suitable, so it must be wisely applied to the design of the apostle.

"The earth, he says, which be sucking in the rain produces a blade suitable to the seed sown, at length by God’s blessing produces a ripe crop; so they who receive the seed of the Gospel into their hearts and bring forth genuine shoots, will always make progress until they produce ripe fruit. On the contrary, the earth, which after culture and irrigation, brings forth nothing but thorns, affords no hope of a harvest; nay, the more that grows which is its natural produce, the more hopeless is the case. Hence the only remedy the husbandman has is to burn up the noxious and useless weeds. So they who destroy the seed of the Gospel, either by their indifference or by corrupt affections, so as to manifest no sign of good progress in their life, clearly show themselves to be reprobates, from whom no harvest can be expected. The apostle then, not only speaks here of the fruit of the Gospel, but also exhorts us promptly to embrace it, and he further tells us, that the blade appears presently after the seed is sown, and that grain follows the daily irrigations". (Dr. John Calvin).

The Lord Jesus completed His parable of the Sower by saying, "Take heed therefore how ye hear" (Luke 8:18): how you profit by it, what use you make of it; be sure that you are a good-ground hearer. Such, are those in whom, first, the Word falls, as into "an honest and good heart" (Luke 8:15), i.e., they bow to its authority, judge themselves by it, are impartial and faithful in applying it to their own failures. Second, they "receive" the Word (Mark 4:20): they make personal appropriation of it, they take it home to themselves, they apply it to their own needs. Third, they "understand" it (Matthew 13:23): they enter into a spiritual and experimental acquaintance with it. Fourth, they "keep" it (Luke 8:15): they retain, heed, obey, practice it. Fifth, they "bring forth fruit with patience" (Luke 8:15), they persevere, overcome all discouragements, triumph over temptations, and walk in the paths of obedience. Upon such the "blessing" of God rests.

Now in contrast from the good-ground hearer, are the wayside, stony, and thorny-ground hearers. These, we believe, are they who come under the common or inferior operations of the Holy Spirit, spoken of in our last article. Let it be carefully noted, First, that even of the wayside hearer (the lowest grade of all) Christ said the Seed was "sown in his heart" (Matthew 13:19). Second, that of the stony-ground hearers it is said, "the same is he that heareth the Word, and anon with joy receiveth it" (Matthew 13:20), and "for a while believeth, and in time of temptation falls away" (Luke 8:13). Third, that of the stony-ground hearer Christ said, "Which when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection" (Luke 8:14). Yet none of them had been born of the Spirit. All that they had brought forth, under His gracious operations, was but the works of the flesh—"thorns and briers".

Above, in our interpretation, we called attention to the difference between the "bringeth forth" of herbs in verse 7, and the "beareth" thorns in verse 8. There is a like producing, but an unlike manner and measure. The former "Bring forth in their lives what was before conceived and cherished in their hearts. They had the root in themselves of what they bring forth. So doth the word here used signify, viz., to bring forth the fruit of an inward conception. The doctrine of the gospel as cast into their hearts, is not only rain but seed also. This is cherished by grace, as precious seed, and as from a spiritual root or principle in their hearts, bringeth forth precious fruit. And herein consists the difference between the fruitbearing of the true believers, and the works of hypocrites or false professors. These latter bring forth fruit like mushrooms, they come up suddenly, have oft-times great bulk and goodly appearance, but are merely a forced excrescence, they have no natural seed or root in the earth. They do not proceed from a living principle in the heart". (Dr. John Owen).

Thus, it should be most carefully borne in mind that the "thorns and briers" of verse 8 have reference not to sins and wickedness as men view things, but to the best products of the flesh, as cultivated by "religion", and that, as instructed out of the Scriptures, and "enlightened" by the Holy Spirit. This is evident from the fact that the thorns and briers, equally with the "herbs", are occasioned by the same "rain" which had come oft upon the earth, and from which they sprang. However fair the professions of the unregenerate may appear in the eyes of their fellows, no matter what proficiency they may reach in an understanding of the letter of Scripture, nor what their zeal in contending for the faith, loyalty to their church, self-sacrifice in their service; yet, in the sight of Him who searcheth the heart and taketh note of the root from which things spring, all is worthless. These products or works are only the fruits of a nature which is under the curse of a holy God.

"But that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected" i.e., of God. Little did the Jews believe this when Paul penned those words. Their great boast was that they were God’s people, that He preferred them above all others. Nevertheless, though He yet withheld His wrath for a little space, He had disowned them. The sad analogy to this is found everywhere in Christendom today. Countless thousands who bear the name of Christ, and who have no doubts but that they are among the true people of God, are yet "rejected" by Him. Are you, my reader, among them?

What need is there for every professing Christian to heed that word in 2 Peter 1:10, "Give diligence to make your calling and election sure"! Those who sit under the ministry of God’s Word are upon trial, and it is high time that many of us who have been so long privileged, should call on ourselves to a strict account with respect to our improvement thereof. What are we bringing forth? Are we producing "the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:11)? If so, all praise to Him who has made us fruitful. Or are we, though not notoriously wicked persons, yet so far as fruit for God is concerned, cumberers of the ground? If upon inquiry we find ourselves at a loss to be sure of which sort of ground we belong unto, and this because of our barrenness and leanness, unless we are hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, we shall give ourselves no rest until we have better evidences of our bearing spiritual fruit.

O let these solemn words search our hearts: "And is nigh unto cursing, whose end is to be burned". Such is the awful fate confronting multitudes of professing Christians in the churches today, who resist all exhortations to produce the fruit of godly living. Corrupt desires, pride, worldliness, covetousness, are as plainly to be seen in their lives, as are thorns and briers on abandoned ground. O what a thought! professing Christians, "nigh unto cursing"! Soon to hear their last sermon. Soon to be cut off out of the land of the living. Afterwards to hear from the lips of Christ the fearful sentence, "Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the Devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41).

### vv. 9-11 Two Christians Described

The passage which is to be before us is in strong and blessed contrast from what we found in verses 4-6. There we beheld a class of people highly favored, blest with grand external privileges, richly gifted, and wrought upon by the Holy Spirit. There we see the faculties of the natural man’s soul wound up to their highest pitch: the conscience searched, the understanding enlightened, the affections drawn out, and the will moved to action. There we have described the character of a class which constitutes a very large proportion of those who profess the name of Christ. Yet, though they have never been born again, though they are unsaved, though their end is destruction, nevertheless, it is by no means an easy matter for a real child of God to identify them. Oftentimes their head-knowledge of the truth, their zeal for religion, their moral qualities, put him to shame. Still, if he weigh them in the balances of the sanctuary, they will be found wanting.

The careful reader of the four Gospels, will discover that in the days of His flesh, the Lord Jesus healed those concerning whom nothing is recorded of their faith. The blessings which He dispensed were not restricted to His disciples. Temporal mercies were bestowed upon natural men as well as upon spiritual. And, be it carefully noted, this was something more, something in addition to, the providential goodness of the Creator, which is extended to all of Adam’s race: "He maketh His sun to rise, on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). Rather did those gracious acts of Christ unto the unbelieving, foreshadow that which we designated in the preceding article, the inferior operations of His Spirit. On a few Christ bestowed spiritual blessings, saving mercies; to others, He imparted temporal blessings, mercies which came short of saving their recipients.

In our last article we made reference to James 1:17: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above". We believe that, in keeping with the character, theme and purpose of that epistle, those words have reference to two distinct classes of gifts, for two different classes of people: the "good" referring to those bestowed, under Gospel-ministry on the non-elect; the "perfect" imparted to God’s own people. A scripture which we believe supplies strong corroboration of this is found in Psalm 68:18. There, in a Messianic prophecy concerning the ascension of Christ, we read, "Thou hast received gifts for men; yea, for the rebellious also": gifts are bestowed by Christ on two distinct classes. It is to be particularly observed that a part of this verse is quoted by the Spirit in Ephesians 4:8; part of it we say, for its closing words, "the rebellious also" are there omitted. And why? Because in Ephesians it is the elect of God (see Hebrews 1:3, 4 etc.) who are in view. Yet, in addition to them, Christ has received "gifts" for the "rebellious also"; that is, for the non-elect too.

Few indeed have perceived that there is a double work of GOD being prosecuted under the ministry of the Gospel. Plain intimation of this is found in the words of Christ in Matthew 22:14, "For many are called, but few chosen." Half of the human race has never heard the Gospel; those who have, are divided into four classes, as Christ has taught us in His parable of the Sower. The "wayside" hearers are those upon whom the preaching of the Gospel produces no effect. The "stony" and the "thorny" ground hearers are they which form a very large percentage of "church members" or who are "in fellowship" with those known as "the Brethren". Of these it is said that they "for a while believe" (Luke 8:13); nor are they unproductive, yet they "bring no fruit to perfection" (Luke 8:14). In them the "enmity" of the carnal mind is, to a considerable extent, subdued; yet it is not vanquished. There is a work of the Spirit upon them, yet it falls short of the new creation. They are "called" but not "chosen".

Only as due attention is paid to the distinction just noted, are we really able to appreciate the point and meaning of the qualifying language which the Spirit of God has used when speaking of the saving call of God’s elect. For example, in Romans 8:28, they are denominated the called "according to His purpose", which notes a distinction from others who receive an inferior "call" according to His providence, under the general proclamation of the Gospel. So too in 2 Timothy 1:9 we read of those "called with a holy calling... according to His own purpose and grace", which is the language of discrimination, signifying there are others called yet not with "a holy calling". So again in 1 Peter 5:10, "The God of all grace, who hath called us unto His eternal glory", is in antithesis from the many who are only called unto a temporal righteousness in this world.

It needs to be very carefully noted that the "us" of the Epistles is frequently used with a far narrower discrimination than from all the rest of the world: very often the "us" is in contrast from the great crowd of lifeless professors which ever surrounds the little handful of God’s true people—professors which, though spiritually lifeless, are yet to be distinguished from the vast multitudes of non-professors; distinguished by a real work of the Holy Spirit upon them, but still an abortive work. Of this class the Epistle of James has much to say. Concerning them John, in his first Epistle, declares "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us" (Heb. 2:19). A work of "calling" must have been wrought upon them, for they had once separated from the world, and united themselves with the true people of God. Moreover, that work of "calling" must have produced such a change in them that they had been accounted real Christians, or otherwise they had not been admitted among such.

The occasion of Christ’s uttering those words "For many are called, but few chosen" (Matthew 22:14) is exceedingly solemn and searching. The context records the parable of the wedding-feast of the King’s Son. First, the invitation to it had been given to the Jews, but they despised it, mistreated God’s servants, and, in consequence, their city was destroyed. Then God’s servants are sent forth into the Gentile highways to bring in others. But when the King inspects the guests, He sees a man "which had not on a wedding-garment". The awful sentence goes forth, "Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness." Immediately after, Christ said, "For many are called, but few chosen".

Now in sharp and blessed contrast from the many professing the name of Christ who have received only the inferior call of God through the Gospel—a call which, yet, leads them to assent to the doctrine of His word, which brings them to espouse the outward cause of Christ in this world, which produces a real reformation in their ways, so that they become respectable and useful members of their community, as well as provide a measure of protection to the few of God’s "chosen" from the openly antagonistic world;—our present passage treats of "the remnant according to the election of grace" (Rom. 11:5). This is clear from its opening words, "But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you." The "But" sets these "beloved" ones in opposition from those mentioned in verse 8. The "better things" also points an antithesis. "Better" is an adjective in the comparative degree, set over against something which is merely "good". Those described in verses 4, 5 had good things, yet these possessed something far better. Mark how this confirms what we have said on James 1:17!

In verses 9-12 we find the apostle doing three things: first, he expresses his good will towards the Hebrew saints; second, he declares his judgment concerning their state; third, he gives the grounds upon which his judgment was based. His aim was that they should make a proper use of what he had set before them in the first eight verses, so that on the one hand they might not be discouraged, and on the other hand not become careless. We subjoin Dr. J. Brown’s summary of our passage. "The general meaning of this paragraph, all the parts of which are closely connected together, plainly is: The reason why I have made these awful statements about apostates, is not because I consider you whom I am addressing as apostates for your conduct proves that this is not your character, and the promise of God secures that this doom shall not be yours; but that you may be stirred up to persevering steadiness in the faith, and hope, and obedience of the truth, by a constant continuance in which alone you can, like those who have gone before you, obtain in all their perfections the promised blessings of the Christian salvation."

"But, beloved" (verse 9). This term testified to the apostle’s good will toward and affection in the Hebrew saints. Such an expression was more than the formal language of courtesy; it revealed the warmth of Paul’s heart for God’s people. Though he had spoken severely to them in Hebrews 5:11-14, it was not because he was unkindly disposed toward them. Love is faithful, and because it seeks the highest good of its objects, will reprove, rebuke, admonish, when occasion calls for it. Spiritual love is regulated not by impulse, but by principle. Herein it differs from the backboneless amiability and affability of the flesh, and from the maudlin sentimentality of the day. "We hence conclude, that not only the reprobates ought to be reproved, severely, and with sharp earnestness, hut also the elect themselves, even those whom we deem to be children of God" (John Calvin).

"The apostle hastens to comfort and encourage, lest the Hebrews should be overwhelmed with fear and sorrow, or lest they should think that their condition was regarded by him as hopeless. The affection of the writer is now eager to inspire hope, and to draw them with the cords of love. The word ‘beloved’ is introduced here most appositely, a term of endearment which occurs frequently in other epistles, but only once in ours; not that the apostle was not filled with true and fervent love to the Hebrew Christians, but that he felt obliged to restrain as it were his feelings, by reason of the prejudices against him. But here the expression bursts forth, as in a moment of great danger or of anxious suspense the heart will speak out in tender language (Adolph Saphir).

"But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you". In these words the apostle sets forth his judgment concerning the spiritual state of the Hebrews (cf. Hebrews 3:1). The "persuasion" here did not amount to an infallible certitude, but was a strong confidence based on good grounds. It is similar to what we find in Romans 15:14, "I myself also am persuaded of you my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another". So again in 2 Timothy 1:5, "When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also." However low the spiritual condition of these Hebrews (Heb. 5:11-14), there had been, and still was found in them, fruit, such as manifested them to be truly regenerated souls. It ever holds good that a tree is known by its fruits, hence, the genuineness of my Christian profession is evidenced by what I bring forth, or its worthlessness by what I fail to produce. There may be a "form of godliness" (2 Tim. 3:5), but if the power thereof be "denied" by my works (Titus 1:16) then is it profitless and vain.

"But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you." It is the bounden duty of every pastor to ascertain the spiritual condition of his people: "Be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks" (Prov. 27:23). This is very necessary if the servant of God is to minister suitably and seasonably. While he is ignorant of their state, he knows not when or how to rebuke or console, to warn or encourage. A general preaching at random is little more than a useless formality. A physician of bodies must acquaint himself with the condition of his patients, otherwise he cannot prescribe intelligently or effectually. Equally so it is with a physician of souls. The same principle holds good in the fellowship of Christians one with another. I cannot really love a brother with the Gospel-love which is required of me, unless I have a well-grounded persuasion that he is a brother.

"And things that accompany salvation" (verse 9). The word "accompany" signifies "conjoined with", or inseparable from, that which has a sure connection with "salvation". The principal things that "accompany salvation" are sorrow for and hatred of sin, humility or self-abnegation, the peace of God comforting the conscience, godly fear or the principle of obedience, a diligent perseverance in using the appointed means of grace and pressing forward in the race set before us, the spirit of prayer, and a joyous expectation of being conformed to the image of Christ and spending eternity with Him. True Gospel faith and sincere obedience are far "better things" than the most dazzling gifts ever bestowed on unregenerate professors.

To believe on Christ is very much more than my understanding assenting and my will consenting to the fact that He is a Savior for sinners, and ready to receive all who will come to Him. To be received by Christ, I must come to Him renouncing all my righteousness (Rom. 10:3), as an empty-handed beggar (Matthew 19:21). But more; to be received by Christ, I must come to Him forsaking my self-will and rebellion against Him (Ps. 2:11, 12; Proverbs 28:13). Should an insurrectionist and seditionist come to an earthly king seeking his sovereign favor and pardon, then, obviously, the very law of his coming to him for forgiveness requires that he should come on his knees, laying aside his hostility. So it is with a sinner who comes to Christ for pardon; it is against the law of faith to do otherwise.

An "unfeigned faith" (2 Tim. 1:5) in Christ, is one which submits to His yoke and bows to His authority. There is no such thing in Scripture as receiving Christ as Savior without also receiving Him as Lord: "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk ye in Him" (Col. 2:6). If it be an honest and genuine faith, it is inseparably connected with a spirit of obedience, a desire to please Him, a resolve to not henceforth live unto self, but unto Him which died for me (2 Cor. 5:15). The man who really thinks he has a saving faith in Christ, but yet has no concern for His glory and no heart for His commandments, is blinded by Satan. There are things which "accompany salvation", that have a certain connection therewith. As light is inseparable from the shining of the sun, as heat is inseparable from fire, so good works are inseparable from a saving faith.

"Though we thus speak" (verse 9). The reference is to what the apostle had said about apostates in verses 6, 8, and which had been written to these Hebrews as a solemn and searching warning for them to take to heart. "In the visible professing church, all things outwardly seemed to be equal. There are the same ordinances administered unto all, the same profession of faith is made by all, the same outward duties are attended unto, and scandalous offenses are by all avoided. But yet things are not internally equal. In a great house, there are vessels of wood and stone, as well as of gold and silver. All that eat outwardly of the bread of life, do not feed on the hidden manna. All that have their names enrolled in the church’s book, may yet not have them written in the Lamb’s book. There are yet better things than gifts, profession, participation of ordinances and whatever is of the like nature. And the use hereof in one word is to warn all sorts of persons, that they rest not in, that they take not up with an interest in, or participation of the privileges of the church, with a common profession, which may give them a name to live; seeing they may be dead or in a perishing condition in the meantime" (Dr. John Owen).

"For God is not unrighteous to forget your work" (verse 10). Here the apostle makes known the ground on which his "persuasion" rested, and that was, the unchanging faithfulness of God toward His covenant promises unto His people, and why he believed that these Hebrews were numbered among them. The foundation on which confidence should rest concerning my own security unto eternal glory, as that of my fellow-Christians, is nothing in the creature. "It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed" (Lam. 3:22). The believer’s perseverance is not the cause but the consequence of God’s preservation.

"For God is not unrighteous to forget your work". A scripture which enables us to understand the force of these words is 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins". God is "faithful" to His covenant engagements with us in the person of His Son; "just", to the full satisfaction which He rendered unto Him. The very justice of God is engaged on the behalf of those whom Christ redeemed. His veracity towards us is pledged: "In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began" (Titus 1:2). And because God is immutable, without variableness or shadow of turning, He cannot go back on His own oath: "For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (Mal. 3:6). Therefore have we the absolute assurance that "He which hath begun a good work in you will finish it" (Phil. 1:6).

"For God is not unrighteous to forget your work". Some have found a difficulty here, because these words seem to teach that heaven is a reward earned by good works. But the difficulty is more seeming than real. What God rewards is only what He Himself hath wrought in us: it is the Father’s recognition of the Spirit’s fruit. "The act of a benefactor in entering into engagements with his beneficiary may be wholly gratuitous, and yet, out of his act, rights may grow up to the beneficiary. The advantages thus acquired are not the less gracious, because they have become rights; for they originated in free grace" (Dr. Sampson, 1857). It may look now as though God places little value on sincere obedience to Him, that in this world the man who lives for self gains more than he who lives for Christ; yet, in a soon-coming day it shall appear far otherwise.

"For God is not unrighteous to forget your works". "God does not pay us a debt, but performs what He has of Himself freely promised, and not so much on our works, as on His own grace in our works; nay, He looks not so much on our works, as on His own grace in our works. And this is to be ‘righteous’, for He cannot deny Himself . . . God is righteous in recompensing works, because He is true and faithful; and He has made Himself a debtor to us, not by receiving anything from us, but, as Augustine says, by freely promising all things" (John Calvin). They who imagine there is an inconsistency between the God of all grace "rewarding" His people, will do well to ponder carefully the Reformer’s words.

"Your work". We believe the reference here is to their faith. First, because he is here speaking of the "things that accompany salvation", and faith is inseparable therefrom. Second, because faith "worketh by love" (Gal. 5:6), and the very next thing mentioned in our verse is their "labor of love". Third, because in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 we read of the "work of faith, and labor of love, and patience of hope", and in Hebrews 6:11, we have their "hope" mentioned. Should it be inquired, Why did the apostle omit the express mention of "faith" here? We answer, Because their faith was so small and feeble. To have commended their faith directly, would have weakened the force of his repeated exhortations in Hebrews 3:12, 4:1, 2, 6:12, 12:1 etc. "Your work" refers not to any single work, but to a course of working, i.e., the whole course of obedience to God, of which faith is the principle moving thereunto. Evangelical obedience is thus denominated "your work" because this is what they had been regenerated unto (see Ephesians 2:10), and because such a course calls for activity, pains, toil; cf. "all diligence" (2 Pet. 1:5).

A living faith is a working faith (James 2:17). Two things are plainly and uniformly taught throughout the New Testament. Justification is by faith, and not by works, (Rom. 4, etc.). Yet, such justifying faith is a living, operative, fruitful faith, evidencing itself by obedience to the commands of God (1 John 2:4, etc.). Christ gave Himself for us that "He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works" (Titus 2:14). This greatly needs emphasizing today and pressing repeatedly upon those professing to be believers in the Lord Jesus, for multitudes of these have a name to live, but "art dead" (Rev. 3:1). Their faith is not that of God’s elect (Titus 1:1), but nothing better or different than that which the demons have (James 2:19).

"Your faith and the labor of love", for so the Greek reads. These were the evidences upon which the apostle grounded his confidence concerning the Hebrew saints. Five things are to be noted. First this distinguishing grace, their "labor of love": let the reader turn to and ponder carefully 1 John 3:16-19; 4:7-12. "Mutual love among believers is a fruit of the Spirit of holiness, and an effect of faith, whereby being knit together in the bond of entire spiritual affection, on the account of their joint interest in Christ; and participation of the same, new, divine, spiritual nature from God, they do value, delight and rejoice in one another, and are mutually helpful in a constant discharge of all those duties whereby their eternal, spiritual and temporal good may be promoted" (Dr. John Owen). Note "labor of love": a lazy love, like that of James 2:15, 16, is no evidence of saving faith. True love is active, diligent, untiring.

"Which ye have showed". This gives us the second feature of their love. It was not a secret and un-manifested love: but one that had been plainly evidenced in a practical way. In James 2:18 the professor is challenged to "show" his faith, today it would also be pertinent to ask many of those who bear the name of Christ to "show" their love, especially along the line of 1 John 5:2. "Which ye have showed toward His name," defines, third, the end before them in the exercise of their ardent love in ministering to the saints. The words last quoted have a threefold force. Objectively, because God’s name is upon His people (Eph. 3:15). It is both blessed and solemn to know that whatever is done unto the people of God, whether it be good or evil, is done toward the name of Christ: Matthew 25:34-45. Formally: they ministered to the saints as the people of God. This it is which gives spiritual love its distinctive character: when it is exercised to souls because God’s name is on them. Efficiently: the "name of God" stands for His authority. God requires His people to love one another, and when they do so out of obedience to Him, it is, necessarily, done "toward His name", having respect to His will.

"In that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister". This tells us, fourth, the manner in which their love had been exercised: in an untiring service. Fifth, it announces, the objects of their love, God’s "saints". Many of God’s people are in various kinds of temporal distress, and one reason why their loving Father permits this is, that their brethren and sisters in Christ may have the holy privilege of ministering to them: see Romans 15:25-27, 2 Corinthians 8:21, 9:11-15. But let such ministry be rendered not from sentimental considerations, nor to satisfy an uneasy conscience, still less with the object of vain glory, to gain a reputation for benevolence; rather let it be "shown toward His name". It is the owning of His authority, the conscious performance of His will, which alone gives life, spirituality and acceptance unto all those duties of love which we are able to perform to others.

In summing up the teaching of verses 9, 10, let us observe how the apostle justified the Hebrews according to his Master’s rule in Matthew 7:15-20. Genuine Christians give plain evidence that their profession of the Gospel is accompanied by transforming grace. The obedience of faith and the labor of love toward the saints—not from human instincts, but out of submission to the revealed will of God—both in the past and in the present, were the visible ground of Paul’s good persuasion concerning them. It is important to note what were the particular graces singled out for mention. The apostle says nothing about their clear views of the truth, their missionary activities, zeal for "their church"—which are the things that many formal professors boast in.

"And we desire that every one of you do show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end" (verse 11). The apostle looks back to the exhortation of v. 1 and also the solemn warning pointed in verses 4-8. His purpose had been to excite them unto a diligent persevering continuance in faith and in love, with the fruits thereof. All he had said was unto this end. The closer connection of this verse with the preceding one is: having expressed his conviction about their spiritual state, and having assured them of a blessed issue of their faith from the fidelity of God, he now presses upon them their responsibility to answer to the judgment he had formed of them, by diligent progress unto the end.

In this verse (11) the apostle, with heavenly wisdom, makes known the proper use and end of Gospel threatenings (verses 6-8), and Gospel promises (verses 9, 10): either may be, and often are, abused. Many have looked upon threatenings as serving no other purpose than a terrifying of the minds of men, causing them to despair; as if the things threatened must inevitably be their portion. Few have known how to make a right application of them to their consciences. On the other hand, many have abused the promises of God: those who had no title to such have suffered themselves to be deceived, and to be so falsely comforted by them to lie down in a carnal security, imagining that no evil could befall them. But here the apostle reveals the proper end of each, both to believers and unbelievers: the threatenings should stir up to earnest examination of the foundation of our hope; the promises should encourage unto a constant and patient diligence in all the duties of obedience. What wisdom is needed by a minister of the Gospel to make a proper and due use of both upon his hearers!

"And", or rather (Greek) "But we desire". In verses 9,10 the apostle had told them what was not his object in making to them the statements of verses 4-8; now he tells them what it was. The word "desire" here signifies an intense longing; without this, preaching is cold, formal, lifeless. "That every one of you": the loving care and untiring efforts of the minister should be extended to all the members of his flock. The oldest, as much as the youngest, is in need of constant exhortation. "Do show the same diligence... unto the end". Unless this be done, our profession will not be preserved nor God glorified. Paul knew nothing of that half-heartedness and sluggish neglect of the means of grace which today satisfies the generality of those bearing the name of Christ. "Give thyself wholly to them" (1 Tim. 4–15).

Many are very "diligent" in their worldly business, still more are most punctual in prosecuting their round of pleasure and fleshly gratification; but there are very few indeed who exercise a godly concern for their souls. To an earnest endeavor after personal holiness, the work of faith and labor of love, the vast majority of professors are strangers, nor can they be persuaded that any such things are required or expected from them. They may be regular attenders of "church" from force of custom; they may perform certain acts of charity for the sake of their reputation; but to be really exercised in heart as to how they may please and honor God in the details of their lives, they know nothing and care still less. Such are destitute of those things which "accompany salvation"; they are deluded and lost souls. Make no mistake, my reader, unless there is in you a work of faith in keeping God’s commandments, and a labor of love toward His saints as such, then "the root of the matter" (Job 19:28) is not in you. This is the test of profession, and the rule whereby each of us shall be measured.

Nor can this work of faith and labor of love be persisted in without studious diligence and earnest endeavor. It calls for the daily searching of the Scriptures, and that, not for intellectual gratification, but to learn God’s will for my walk. It calls for watchfulness and prayer against every temptation which would turn me aside from following Christ. It requires that I should rightly abstain from "fleshly lusts that war against the soul" (1 Pet. 2:11), yielding myself unto God as one that is passed from death unto life, and my members "as instruments of righteousness unto God" (Rom. 6:13). It requires that I "lay aside every weight" (whatever hinders vital godliness) and the sin which doth so easily beset (the love of self), and run (which calls for the putting forth of all our energies) the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1, 2),and that race is a fleeing from the things of this doomed world, with our faces set steadfastly towards God. Those who despise, or even continue to neglect such things, are only nominal Christians.

This "diligence" is to be shown "to the full assurance of hope". Full assurance here signifies a firm conviction or positive persuasion. "Hope" in the New Testament means an ardent desire for and strong expectation of obtaining its object. Faith looks to the Promiser, hope to the things promised. Faith begets hope. God has promised His people perfect deliverance from sin and all its troubles, and full enjoyment of everlasting glory with Himself. Faith rests on the power and veracity of God to make good His word. The heart ponders these blessings, and sees them as yet future. Hope values and anticipates the realization of them. Like faith, "hope" has its degrees. "Full assurance of hope" signifies a steady prevailing persuasion, a persuasion which issues from faith in the promises made concerning "good things to come". The "diligence" before mentioned, is God’s appointed means toward this full assurance: compare 2 Peter 1:10, 11. To cherish a hope of Heaven while I am living to please self is wicked presumption. "Unto the end": no furloughs are granted to those called upon to "fight the good fight of faith" (1 Tim. 6:12); there is no discharge from that warfare as long as we are left upon the field of battle. No spiritual state is attainable in this life, where "reaching forth unto those things which are before" (Phil. 3:13) becomes unnecessary.

## Albert Barnes

### v. 4

Verse 4. *For it is impossible*. It is needless to say that the passage here Heb 6:4-6 has given occasion to much controversy, and that the opinions of commentators and of the Christian world are yet greatly divided in regard to its meaning. On the one hand, it is held that the passage is not intended to describe those who are true Christians, but only those who have been awakened and enlightened, and who then fall back; and on the other, it is maintained that it refers to those who are true Christians, and who then apostatize. The contending parties have been Calvinists and Armenians; each party, in general, interpreting it according to the views which are held on the question about falling from grace. I shall endeavour, as well as I may be able, to state the true meaning of the passage, by an examination of the words and phrases in detail: observing here, in general, that it seems to me that it refers to true Christians; that the object is to keep them from apostasy; and that it teaches that, if they should apostatize, it would be impossible to renew them again, or to save them. That it refers to true Christians will be apparent from these considerations:--

 (1.) Such is the sense which would strike the great mass of readers. Unless there were some theory to defend, the great body of readers of the New Testament would consider the expression here used as describing true Christians.

 (2.) The connexion demands such an interpretation. The apostle was addressing Christians. He was endeavouring to keep them from apostasy. The object was not to keep those who were awakened and enlightened from apostasy, but it was to preserve those who were already in the Church of Christ from going back to perdition. The kind of exhortation appropriate to those who were awakened and convicted, but who were not truly converted, would be *to become converted*; not to warn them of the danger of *falling away*. Besides, the apostle would not have said of such persons that they could not be converted and saved. [But of sincere Christians it might be said, with the utmost propriety, that they *could not* be renewed again, and be saved, if they should fall away--because they rejected the only plan of salvation after they had tried it, and renounced the only scheme of redemption after they had tasted its benefits. If that plea could not save them, what could? If they neglected that, by what Other means could they be brought to God?

 (3.) This interpretation accords, as I suppose, with the exact meaning of the phrases which the apostle uses. An examination of those phrases will show that he refers to those who are sincere believers. The phrase "it is impossible," obviously and properly denotes absolute impossibility. It has been contended, by Storr and others, that it denotes only great difficulty. But the meaning which would at first strike all readers would be, that the thing could not be done; that it was not merely very difficult, but absolutely impracticable. The word--αδυνατον--occurs only in the New Testament in the following places, in all which it denotes that the thing could not be done. Matt 19:26; Mark 10:27: "With men this is impossible;" that is, men could not save one who was rich; implying that the thing was wholly beyond human power. Lk 18:27: "The things which are impossible with men are possible with God"---referring to the same case. Acts 14:8 "A man of Lystra, impotent in his feet;" that is, who was wholly unable to walk. Rom 8:3: "For what the law could not do;" what was absolutely impossible for the law to accomplish; that is, to save men. Heb 6:18: "In which it was impossible for God to lie." Heb 10:4: "It is not *possible* for the blood of bulls and of goats to take away sin." And Heb 11:6: "Without faith it is *impossible* to please God."--In all of these instances denoting absolute impossibility. These passages show that it is not merely a great difficulty to which the apostle refers, but that he meant to say that the thing was wholly impracticable; that it could not be done. And if this be the meaning, then it proves that if those referred to should fall away, they could never be renewed; their case was hopeless, and they must perish:--that is, if a true Christian should apostatize, or fall from grace, he never could be renewed again, and could not be saved. Paul did not teach that he might fall away and be renewed again as often as he pleased. He had other views of the grace of God than this; and he meant to teach, that **if a man should once cast off true religion, his case was hopeless, and he must perish:** and by this solemn consideration--the only one that would be effectual in such a case--he meant to guard them against the danger of apostasy.

 *For those who were once enlightened*. The phrase "to be enlightened" is one that is often used in the Scriptures, and may be applied either to one whose understanding has been enlightened to discern his duty, though he is not converted, (comp. Jn 1:9;) or, **more commonly, to one who is truly converted.** Eph 1:18. **It does not of necessity refer to true Christians, though it cannot be denied that it more obviously suggests the idea that the heart is truly changed**, and that it is more commonly used in that sense. Comp. Ps 19:8. Light, in the Scriptures, is the emblem of knowledge, holiness, and happiness; and there is no impropriety here in understanding it in accordance with the more decisive phrases which follow, as referring to true Christians.

 *And have tasted*. To taste of a thing means, according to the usage in the Scriptures, to experience, or to understand it. The expression is derived from the fact, that the **taste is one of the means by which we ascertain the nature or quality of an object.** Comp. Matt 16:28; John 8:51; Heb 2:9. The proper idea here is, that they had *experienced* the heavenly gift, or had learned its nature.

 *The heavenly gift*. The gift from heaven, or which pertains to heaven. Jn 4:10. The expression properly means, some favour or gift which has descended from heaven; and may refer to any of the benefits which God has conferred on man in the work of redemption. It might include the plan of salvation; the forgiveness of sins; the enlightening, renewing, and sanctifying influences of the Holy Spirit, or any one of the graces which that spirit imparts. The use of the article, however,--" the heavenly gift,"--limits it to something special, as being conferred directly from heaven; and the connexion would seem to demand that we understand it of some peculiar favour which could be conferred only on the children of God. It is an expression which may be applied to sincere Christians; it is at least doubtful whether it can with propriety be applied to any other.

 *And were made partakers of the Holy Ghost*. Partakers of the influences of the Holy Ghost--for it is only in this sense that we can partake of the Holy Spirit. We *partake* of food when we share it with others; we partake of pleasure when we enjoy it with others; we *partake* of spoils in war when they are divided between us and others. So we *partake* of the influences of the Holy Spirit when we share these influences conferred on his people. This is not language which can properly be applied to any one but a true Christian; and though it is true that an unpardoned sinner may be enlightened and awakened by the Holy Spirit, yet the language here used is not such as would be likely to be employed to describe his state. It is too clearly expressive of those influences which renew and sanctify the soul. It is as elevated language as can be used to describe the joy of the Christian, and is undoubtedly used in that sense here. If it is not, it would be difficult to find any language which would properly express the condition of a renewed heart. Grotius, Bloomfield, and some others, understood this or the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit. But this is not necessary, and does not accord well with the general description here, which evidently pertains to the mass of those whom the apostle addressed.

 (b) "impossible" Matt 5:13; Matt 12:31; Matt 12:32; John 15:6; Heb 10:26; 2Pet 2:20; 2Pet 2:21 1Jn 5:16

### v. 5

Verse 5. *And have tasted the good word of God*. That is, either the doctrines which he teaches, and which are good or pleasant to the soul; or the word of God which is connected with good, that is, which promises good. The former seems to be the correct meaning--that the word of God, or the truth which he taught, was itself a good. It was that which the soul desired, and in which it found comfort and peace. Comp. Ps 119:103; Ps 141:6. The meaning here is, that they had experienced the excellency of the truth of God; they had seen and enjoyed its beauty. This is language which cannot be applied to an impenitent sinner. He has no *relish* for the truth of God; sees no beauty in it; derives no comfort from it. It is only the true Christian who has pleasure in its contemplation, and who can be said to "taste" and enjoy it. This language describes a state or mind of which every sincere Christian is conscious, It is that of pleasure in the word of God. He loves the Bible; he loves the truth of God that is preached. He sees an exquisite beauty in that truth. It is not merely in its poetry; in its sublimity; in its argument; but he has now a taste or relish for the truth itself, which he had not before his conversion. Then he might have admired the Bible for its beauty of language, or for its poetry; he might have been interested in preaching for its eloquence or power of argument; but now his love is for the truth. Comp. Ps 19:10. There is no book that he so much delights in as the Bible; and no pleasure is so pure as that which he has in contemplating the truth. Comp. Josh 21:45; Josh 23:16.

 *And the powers of the world to come*. Or of the "coming age." "The age to come" was a phrase in common use among the Hebrews, to denote the future dispensation, the times of the Messiah. The same idea was expressed by the phrases, "the last times," "the end of the world," etc., which are of so frequent occurrence in the Scriptures. They all denoted an age which was to succeed the old dispensation; the time of the Messiah; or the period in which the affairs of the world would be wound up. Isa 2:2. Here it evidently refers to that period; and the meaning is, that they had participated in the peculiar blessings to be expected in that dispensation--to wit, in the clear views of the way of salvation, and the influences of the Holy Spirit on the soul. The word "powers" here implies that in that time there would be some extraordinary manifestation of the *power* of God. An unusual energy would be put forth to save men, particularly as evinced by the agency of the Holy Spirit on the heart. Of this "power" the apostle here says they of whom he spake had partaken. They had been brought under the awakening and renewing energy which God put forth under the Messiah, in saving the soul. They had experienced the promised blessings of the new and last dispensation; and the language here is such as appropriately describes Christians, and as indeed can be applicable to no other. It may be remarked respecting the various expressions used here, Heb 6:4; Heb 6:5,

 (1.) that they are such as properly denote a renewed state. They obviously describe the condition of a Christian; and though it may be not certain that any *one* of them, if taken by itself, would *prove* that the person to whom it was applied was truly converted, yet, taken together, it is clear that they are designed to describe such a state. If they are not, it would be difficult to find any language which would be properly descriptive of the character of a sincere Christian. I regard the description here, therefore, as that which is clearly **designed to denote the state of those who were born again, and were the true children of God;** and it seems plain to me, that no other interpretation would have ever been thought of, if this view had not seemed to conflict with the doctrine of the "perseverance of the saints."

 (2.) There is a regular gradation here from the first elements of piety in the soul to its highest developments; and, whether the apostle so designed it or not, the language describes the successive steps by which a true Christian advances to the highest stage of Christian experience. The mind is

 (a.) enlightened; then

 (b.) tastes the gift of heaven, or has some experience of it; then

 (c.) it is made to partake of the influences of the Holy Ghost; then

 (d.) there is experience of the excellence and loveliness of the word of God; and

 (e.) finally, there is a participation of the full "powers" of the new dispensation--of the extraordinary energy which God puts forth in the gospel to sanctify and save the soul.

 (+) "to come" "The mighty works of that age that is to come"

### v. 6

Verse 6. *If they shall fall away*. Literally, "and having fallen away." "There is no *if* in the Greek in this place--' having fallen away.'" *Dr. J. P. Wilson*. It is not an affirmation that any *had* actually fallen away, or that, in fact, they would do it; but the statement is, that on the supposition that they had fallen away, it would be impossible to renew them again. It is the same as supposing a case which, in fact, might never occur:--as if we should say, "had a man fallen down a precipice, it would be impossible to save him;" or, "had the child fallen into the stream, he would certainly have been drowned." But though this literally means "having fallen away," yet the sense, in the connexion in which it stands, is not improperly expressed by our common translation. The Syriac has given a version Which is remarkable, not as a correct translation, but as showing what was the prevailing belief in the time in which it was made, (probably the first or second century,) in regard to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. "For it is impossible that they who have been baptized, and who have tasted the gift which is from heaven, and have received the spirit of holiness, and have tasted the good word of God, and the power of the coming age, should again sin, so that they should be renewed again to repentance, and again crucify the Son of God, and put him to ignominy." The word rendered "*fall away*" means, properly, "to fall near by any one;" "to fall in with, or meet;" and thus to fall aside from, to swerve or deviate from; and here means undoubtedly to apostatize from, and implies an entire renunciation of Christianity, or a going back to a state of Judaism, heathenism, or sin. The Greek word occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. It is material to remark here, that the **apostle does not say that any true Christian ever had fallen away.** He makes a statement of what would occur on the supposition that such a thing should happen -but a statement may be made of what would occur on the supposition that a certain thing should take place, and yet it be morally certain that the event never would happen. It would be easy to suppose what would happen if the ocean should overflow a continent, or if the sun should cease to rise, and still there be entire certainty that such an event never would occur.

 *To renew them again*. Implying that they had been before renewed, or had been true Christians. The word ***again*"--παλιν --supposes this; and this passage, therefore, confirms the considerations suggested above, showing that they were true Christians who were referred to.** They had once repented, but it would be impossible to bring them to this state again. The declaration, of course, is to be read in connexion with the first clause of Heb 6:4, "It is impossible to renew again to repentance those who once were true Christians, should they fall away." I know of no declaration more unambiguous than this. It is a positive declaration. It is not that it would be very difficult to do it; or that it would be impossible for man to do it, though it might be done by God; it is an unequivocal and absolute declaration that it would be utterly impracticable that it should be done by any one, or by any means; and this, I have no doubt, is the meaning of the apostle. **Should a Christian fall from grace, he *must perish*. HE NEVER COULD BE SAVED** The *reason* of this the apostle immediately, adds.

 *Seeing*. This word is not in the Greek, though the sense is expressed. The Greek literally is, "having again crucified to themselves the Son of God." The reason here given is, that the crime would be so great, and they would so effectually exclude themselves from the only plan of salvation, that they could not be saved. There is but one way of salvation. Having tried that, and then renounced it, how could they then be saved? The case is like that of a drowning man. If there was but one plank by which he could be saved, and he should get on that, and then push it away and plunge into the deep, he must die. Or if there was **but one rope by which the shore could be reached from a wreck, and he should cut that and cast it off,** he must die. Or if a man were sick, and there was but one kind of medicine that could possibly restore him, and he should deliberately dash that away, he must die. So in religion. There is but *one way* of salvation. If a man deliberately rejects that, he must perish.

 *They crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh*. Our translators have rendered this as if the Greek were-- ανασταυρουνταςπαλιν-- *crucify again*, and so it is rendered by Chrysostom, by Tindal, Coverdale, Beza, Luther, and others. But this is not properly the meaning of the Greek. The word ανασταυροω is an *intensive* word, and is employed instead of the usual word "to crucify," only to denote emphasis. It means that such an act of apostasy would be equivalent to **crucifying him in an aggravated manner.** Of course this is to be taken *figuratively*. It could not be literally true that they would thus crucify the Redeemer. The meaning is, that their conduct would be as if they had crucified him; it would bear a strong resemblance to the act by which the Lord Jesus was publicly rejected and condemned to die. The act of crucifying the Son of God was the great crime which outpeers any other deed of human guilt. Yet the apostle says, that should they who had been true Christians fall away, and reject him, they would be guilty of a similar crime. **It would be a public and solemn act of rejecting him.** It would show that if they had been there they would have joined in the cry, "Crucify him, crucify him!" The *intensity* *and aggravation* of such a crime perhaps the apostle meant to indicate by the intensive or emphatic ανα in the ανασταυρουντας. Such an act would render their salvation impossible, because

 (1.) the crime would be aggravated beyond that of those who rejected him and put him to death--for they knew not what they did; and

 (2.) because it would be a **rejection of the only possible plan of salvation**, after they had had experience of its power and known its efficacy. The phrase "to themselves," Tindal renders, "as concerning themselves." Others, "as far as in them lies," or as far as they have ability to do. Others, "to their own heart." Probably Grotius has suggested the true sense. "They do it *for themselves*. They make the act their own. It is as if they did it themselves; and they are to be regarded as having done the deed." So **we make the act of another our own when we authorize it beforehand**, or approve of it after it is done.

 *And put him to an open shame*. Make him a public example; or **hold him up as worthy of death on the cross.** See the same word explained in Mt 1:19, in the phrase, "make her a public example." The word occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. Their apostasy and rejection of the Saviour would be like holding him up publicly as deserving the infamy and ignominy of the cross. A great part of the crime attending the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus, consisted in exhibiting him to the passing multitude as deserving the death of a malefactor. Of that sin they would partake who should reject him, for they would thus show that they regarded his religion as an imposture, and would, in a public manner, hold him up as worthy only of rejection and contempt. Such, it seems to me, is the fair meaning of this much-disputed passage--a passage which Would never have given so much perplexity **if it had not been supposed that the obvious interpretation would interfere with some prevalent articles of theology**. The passage proves that **if true Christians should apostatize, it would be impossible to renew and save them.** If then it should be asked whether I believe that any true Christian ever did, or ever will fall from grace, and wholly lose his religion, I would answer unhesitatingly, *No*. Comp. John 10:27; John 10:28; Rom 8:38; Rom 8:39; Gal 5:4. If then it be asked what was the *use* of a warning like this, I answer,

 (1.) It would show the great sin of apostasy from God if it were to occur. It is proper to state the greatness of an act of sin, though it might never occur, in order to show how it would be regarded by God.

 (2.) Such a statement might be one of the **most effectual means of preserving from apostasy**. To state that a fall from a precipice would cause certain death, would be one of the most certain means of **preserving one from falling**; to affirm that arsenic would be certainly fatal, is one of the most effectual means of preventing its being taken; to know that fire certainly destroys, is one of the most sure checks from the danger. Thousands have been preserved from going over the Falls of Niagara by knowing that there would be no possibility of escape; and so effectual has been this knowledge, that it has preserved all from such a catastrophe, except the very few who have gone over by accident. So in religion. The **knowledge that apostasy would be fatal**, and there could be no hope of being saved should it once occur, **would be a more effectual preventive of the danger than all the other means that could be used.** If a man believed that it would be an easy matter to be restored again, should he apostatize, he would feel little solicitude in regard to it; and it has occurred, in fact, that they who suppose that this may occur, have manifested little of the care to walk in the paths of strict religion, which should have been evinced.

 (3.) It may be added, that the **means used by God to preserve his people from apostasy have been entirely effectual.** **There is no evidence that one has ever fallen away who was a true Christian**, Comp. John 10:27; John 10:28, and 1Jn 2:19; and to the end of the world it will be true, that the means which he uses to keep his people from apostasy will not in a single instance fail.

 (\*) "seeing" "Since" (+) "afresh" "again"

### v. 7

Verse 7. *For the earth*. The design of the apostle by this comparison is apparent. It is to show the consequences of not making a proper use of all the privileges which Christians have, and the effect which would follow should those privileges fail to be improved. He says, it is like the earth. If that absorbs the rain, and produces an abundant harvest, it receives the Divine blessing. If not, it is cursed, or is worthless. The design is to show that if Christians should become like the barren earth, they would be cast away and lost.

 *Which drinketh in the rain*. A comparison of the earth as if it were "thirsty"--a comparison that is common in all languages.

 *That cometh oft upon it*. The frequent showers that fall. The object is, to describe fertile land which is often watered with the rains of heaven. The comparison of "drinking in" the rain is designed to distinguish a mellow soil which receives the rain, from hard or rocky rand where it runs off.

 *And bringeth forth herbs*. The word herbs we now limit, in common discourse, to the small vegetables which die every year, and which are used as articles of food, or to such in general as have not ligneous or hard woody stems. The word here means anything which is cultivated in the earth as an article of food, and includes all kinds of grains.

 *Meet for them*. Useful or appropriate to them.

 *By whom it is dressed*. Marg. "*for* whom." The meaning is, on account of whom it is cultivated. The word "dressed" here means *cultivated*. Comp. Gen 2:15.

 *Receiveth blessing from God*. Receives the Divine approbation. It is in accordance with his wishes and plans, and he stories upon it and blesses it. He does not curse it, as he does the desolate and barren soil. **The language is figurative, and must be used to denote that which is an object of the Divine favour.** God delights in the harvests which the earth brings forth; in the effects of dews and rains and suns, in causing beauty and abundance; and on much fields of beauty and plenty he looks down with pleasure. This does not mean, as I suppose, that he renders it more fertile and abundant, for

 (1.) it cannot be shown that it is true that God thus rewards the earth for its fertility; and

 (2.) such an interpretation would not accord well with the scope of the passage. **The design is to show that a Christian who makes proper use of the means of growing in grace which God bestows upon him, and who does not apostatize, meets with the Divine favour and approbation.** His course accords with the Divine intention and wishes, and he is a man on whom God will smile--as he seems to on the fertile earth.

 (++) "earth" "land" (\*) "meet" "useful" (1) "by" "for" (+) "dressed" "belong to" (a) "blessing" Ps 65:10

### v. 8

Verse 8. *But that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected*. That is, by the farmer or owner. It is abandoned as worthless. The force of the comparison here is, that **God would thus deal with those who professed to be renewed if they should be like such a worthless field.**

 *And is nigh unto cursing*. Is given over to execration, or is abandoned as useless. The word cursing means, devoting to destruction. The sense is not that the owner would curse it in words, or imprecate a curse on it, as a man does who uses profane language, but the language is taken here from the more common use of the word curse--as meaning to devote to destruction. So the land would be regarded by the farmer. It would be valueless, and would be given up to be overrun with fire.

 *Whose end is to be burned*. Referring to the land. The allusion here is to the common practice, among the **Oriental and Roman agriculturists, of burning bad and barren lands.** An illustration of this is afforded by Pliny. "There are some who burn the stubble on the field, chiefly upon the authority of Virgil: the principal reason for which is, that they may burn the seeds of weeds," Nat. Hist. xviii. 30. The authority of Virgil, to which Pliny refers, may be found in Georg. i. 84. "Saepe etiam steriles incendere profuit agros,

 Atque levem stipulam crepitantibus urere flammis."

 "It is often useful to set fire to barren lands, and burn the light stubble in crackling flames." The *object* of burning land in this way was to render it available for useful purposes; or to destroy noxious weeds, and thorns, and underbrush. But the object of the apostle requires him to refer merely to the *fact* of the burning, and to make use of it as an illustration of an act of punishment. So, Paul says, it would be in the dealings of God with his people. If, after all attempts to secure holy living, and to keep them in the paths of salvation, they should evince none of the spirit of piety, all that could be done would be to abandon them to destruction, as such a field is overrun with fire. It is not supposed that a true Christian will fall away and be lost; but we may remark,

 (1.) that there are many **professed Christians** who seem to be in danger of such ruin. They resist all attempts to produce in them the fruits of good living as really as some pieces of ground do to secure a harvest. Corrupt desires, pride, envy, uncharitableness, covetousness, and vanity, are as certainly seen in their lives as thorns and briers are on a bad soil. Such briers and thorns you may cut down again and again; you may strike the plough deep, and seem to tear away all their roots; you may sow the ground with the choicest grain, but soon the briers and the thorns will again appear and be as troublesome as ever. No pains will subdue them or secure a harvest. So with many a professed Christian. He may be taught, admonished, rebuked, and afflicted, but all will not do. There is essential and unsubdued perverseness in his soul, and, despite all the attempts to make him a holy man, the same bad passions are continually breaking out anew.

 (2.) Such **professing Christians** are "nigh unto cursings." They are about to be abandoned for ever. Unsanctified and wicked in their hearts, there is nothing else which can be done for them, and they must be lost! What a thought! A professing Christian "*nigh unto cursing*!" A man, the efforts for whose salvation are about to cease for ever, and who is to be given over as incorrigible and hopeless! For such a man--in the church or out of it--we should have compassion. We have some compassion for an ox which is so stubborn that he will not work, and which is to be put to death; for a horse which is so fractious that he cannot be broken, and which is to be killed; for cattle which are so unruly that they cannot be restrained, and which are only to be fattened for the slaughter; and even for a field which is desolate and barren, and which is given up to be overrun with briers and thorns; but how much more should we pity a man, all the efforts for whose salvation fail, and who is soon to be abandoned to everlasting destruction!

 (++) "accompany" "Belong to"

### v. 9

Verse 9. *But, beloved, we are persuaded better things*. We confidently hope for better things respecting you. We trust that you are true Christians; that you will produce the proper fruits of holiness; that you will be saved.

 *Things that accompany salvation*. Things that pertain to salvation. The Greek phrase here means, "near to salvation," or things that are conjoined with salvation. So Coverdale renders it, "and that salvation is nigher." The form of expression seems to refer to what was said in Heb 6:8. The land overrun with briers was nigh to cursing; the things which Paul saw in them were nigh to salvation. From this verse it is evident

 (1.) that the **apostle regarded them as sincere Christians**, and

 (2.) that **he believed they would not fall away**. Though he had stated what must be the inevitable consequence if Christians should apostatize, yet he says that, in their case, he had a firm conviction that it would not occur. There is no inconsistency in this. We may be certain that if a man should take arsenic it would kill him; and yet we may have the fullest conviction that he will not do it. Is not this verse a clear proof that **Paul felt that it was certain that true Christians would never fall away and be lost?** **If he supposed that they might, how could he be persuaded that it would not happen to them?** Why not to them as well as to others? Learn hence, that while we assure men that *if* they should fall away they would certainly perish, we may nevertheless address them with the full persuasion that they will be saved.

 (++) "accompany" "belong to"

## Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible – Unabridged

### v. 4

***For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost,***

We must 'go on toward perfection;' "For," if we fall away, after having received enlightenment, God will not "permit" - it will be impossible to renew us again to repentance. But see Luk 18:27.

**For those** -`in the case of those.'

**Once enlightened** - once for all illuminated by the Word of God, taught in connection with 'baptism' (to which, in Heb 6:2, as once for all done, "once enlightened" here answers) (cf. Eph 5:26). This passage originated the subsequent application of 'illumination' to baptism. Illumination was not supposed inseparably to accompany baptism. Chrysostom says 'Heretics have baptism, not illumination: they are baptized in body, not enlightened in soul: as Simon Magus was baptized, but not illuminated.' That "enlightened" here means knowledge of the truth appears from comparing [ ***footisthentes*** (G5461)] "illuminated," Heb 10:32, with the corresponding Heb. 6:26 , "knowledge of the truth."

**Tasted** , [for themselves: ***geusamenous*** (G1089)]. As "enlightened" refers to sight, so taste follows (1Pe 2:3).

**The heavenly gift** - Christ given by the Father: revealed by the enlightening word: bestowing peace in the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit (Joh 3:16; Joh 4:10; Joh 6:32; 2Co 9:15): answering to "baptisms" (Heb 6:2 : cf. Act 22:16) and "the Son of God" (Heb 6:6): distinct from "the Holy Spirit" in the next clause, who also is "the gift of God" (Act 8:20).

**Made partakers of the Holy Spirit** - distinct from, though inseparably connected with, "enlightened," "tasted of the heavenly gift," Christ: answering to "laying on of hands" after baptism, then generally accompanied with the impartation of the Holy Spirit in miraculous gifts.

### v. 5

***And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come,***

**Tasted the good word of God** - distinct from "tasted OF (genitive) the heavenly gift." We do not yet enjoy all the fullness of Christ, but only a taste OF "the heavenly gift;" but believers may taste the whole of God's "good word" (accusative) of promise already. The promise of Canaan to Israel typified "the good word" of God's promise of the heavenly rest, (Heb 4:1-16.) Therefore immediately follows "the powers of the world to come." As 'enlightening' and 'tasting of the heavenly gift,' Christ, the Bread of Life, answers to FAITH, so "made partakers of the Holy Spirit," to CHARITY, the first fruit of the Spirit; and "tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come," to HOPE. Thus the triad of privileges answers to the Trinity-Father, Son, and Spirit-in their respective works toward us. "The world to come" is the Christian dispensation, viewed in its future glories, though already begun in grace. It stands in contrast to the course of this world (Eph 2:2), which is disorganized, because God is not its spring of action and end. By faith Christians make the world to come a present reality. "The powers" of this new spiritual world, exhibited in outward miracles partly, and then, as now, especially consisting in the Spirit's inward influences, are the foretaste of the coming inheritance, and lead the believer to seek to live as the angels, to 'sit with Christ in heavenly places,' to set the affection on things above, and not on things on earth, and to look for Christ's coming. This "world to come" thus corresponds to "resurrection of the dead and ... eternal judgment" (Heb 6:2), the first Christian principles which the Hebrew believers had been taught by the Christian light thrown back on their Old Testament (note, Heb 6:1-2). "The world to come," which, as to its "powers," exists already in the redeemed, will pass into a fully realized, manifested fact at Christ's coming (Col 3:4).

### v. 6

***If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.***

**If** , [ ***kai*** (G2532) ***parapesontas*** (G3895)] - 'And (yet) have fallen away' (cf. a less extreme declension, Gal 5:4). Here a total apostasy is meant. The Hebrews had not yet so fallen away; but he warns them that such would be the end of retrogression, if, instead of 'going on to perfection,' they should need to learn again the first principles (Heb 6:1).

**To renew them again.** "Once" (Heb 6:4) already made anew, now they need 'renewal' over "again."

**Crucify to themselves** - `are crucifying to themselves' Christ, instead of crucifying the world unto them by the cross of Christ (Gal 6:14). So Heb 10:29.

**The Son of God** - His dignity marks the heinousness of their offence.

**Put him to an open shame** , [ ***paradeigmatizontas*** (G3856)] - 'make a public example of' Him, as of a malefactor suspended on a tree. What the carnal Israel did outwardly, those who fall away from light do inwardly: they virtually crucify again the Son of God: 'they tear Him out of their hearts, where He fixed His abode, and exhibit Him to the open scoffs of the world as something powerless and common' (Bleek in Alford). The Montanists and Novatians used this passage to justify the lasting exclusion from the Church of the lapsed. The Catholic Church always opposed this, and re-admitted them on repentance, without re-baptism. Persons may be in some sense 'renewed' yet fall away finally; for **"renew ... again" implies that they have been ONCE RENEWED**; **but not that 'the elect' can fall away** (Joh 10:28). **A temporary faith is possible, without one thereby being of the elect** (Mar 4:16-17; Joh 8:31; Joh 8:35; Joh 15:2; Joh 15:5-6).

God's grace is not limited, as if it were "impossible" for God to reclaim even such a rebel so as yet to look on Him whom he has pierced. The **impossibility rests in their having known in themselves once the power of Christ's sacrifice, yet now rejecting it:** there cannot possibly be new means for their renewal afresh: the means provided by God's love they now, after experience of them, deliberately and continuously reject: their conscience being seared, "twice dead" (Jud 1:12), they are past hope, except by a miracle of God's grace. 'It is the curse of evil eternally to propagate evil. The bar to repentance is in the apostate's present attitude toward God, not in his past history, nor in God's attitude toward him. He who abides not in the Christian experiences which he had objectively, was, at the very time when he had them, not subjectively true to them; otherwise, on the principle, "Whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance" (Mat 13:12), he would have abided in them, and not have fallen away' (Tholuck). Such a one was never a Spirit-led disciple of Christ (Rom 8:14-17). The **sin against the Holy Spirit, though similar, is not identical with this**; for that may be committed by those outside the church (as in Mat 12:24; Mat 12:31-32); this, only by those inside.

### v. 7

***For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God:***

**The earth** - rather (no article), 'land.'

**Which drinketh in** - not merely receiving it on the surface: **those who enjoy, objectively, Christian experiences, in some sense renewed by the Holy Spirit**; true of those who persevere, and those who "fall away."

**The rain that cometh oft upon it** - not merely falling over, or toward it, but **falling and resting upon, so as to cover it** [the genitive, ***ep'*** (G1909) ***autees*** (G846): not the accusative]. **The "oft" implies, on God's part, the riches of abounding grace ('coming' spontaneously and frequently);** on the apostate's part, the perversity whereby he does continual despite to the Spirit's oft-repeated motions. Compare "how often," Mat 23:37. The heavenly rain falls both on the elect and the apostates.

**Bringeth forth** - the natural result of 'having drunk in the rain.'

**Meet** - such as the master of the soil wishes. The opposite of "rejected" (Heb 6:8).

**By whom** , [ ***di'*** (G1223) ***hous*** (G3739)] - rather, 'for (i:e., on account of) whom;' namely, the lords of the soil; not the labourers, as the English version-namely, God and Christ (1Co 3:9). The heart is the earth; man, the dresser; herbs are brought forth meet, not for the dresser, by whom, but for God, the owner, for whom, it is dressed. The plural is, the owners, whoever they may be; here. God.

**Receiveth** , [ ***metalambanei*** (G3335)] - 'partaketh of.'

**Blessing** - fruitfulness. Contrast God's curse causing unfruitfulness, Gen 3:17-18; spiritually, Jer 17:5-8.

**From God.** Man's use of means are vain unless God bless (1Co 3:6-7).

### v. 8

***But that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned.***

**That which** rather (Greek, no article), 'but if it (the "land," Heb 6:7) bear' [ ***ekferousa*** (G1627), not so good as ***tiktousa*** (G5088)]; "bringeth forth," Heb 6:7; said of the good soil.

**Briers** , [ ***tribolous*** (G5146)] - 'thistles.'

**Rejected** - by God, after having been tested [ ***adokimos*** (G96)]. Reprobate. **Nigh unto cursing** - verging to being given up to its own barrenness by God's just curse. "Nigh" (near) softens the severity of "it is impossible," etc. (Heb 6:4; Heb 6:6). The ground is not yet actually cursed.

**Whose** - of which (land) the end is [ ***eis*** (G1519) ***kausin*** (G2740)] unto burning, at the last judgment. As the land of Sodom was given to "brimstone, and salt, and burning" (Deu 29:23); so as to the ungodly (Mat 3:10; Mat 3:12; Mat 7:19; Mat 13:30; Joh 15:6; 2Pe 3:10). Jerusalem, which so resisted the grace of Christ, was then near unto cursing, and in a few years was "burned." Compare Mat 22:7, an earnest of a like fate to all abusers of God's grace (Heb 10:26-27).

### v. 9

***But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak.***

**Beloved.** Appositely introduced: LOVE prompts me in the strong warnings I have just given; not that I entertain unfavourable thoughts of you; nay, I anticipate better things of you ('the things which are better'); that ye are not thorn-bearing, nigh unto cursing, and doomed unto burning, but heirs of salvation in accordance with God's faithfulness (Heb 6:10).

**We are persuaded** - on good grounds: by proofs [ ***pepeismetha*** (G3982) stronger than pepoithamen]. Compare Rom 15:14. A confirmation of the Pauline authorship of this letter.

**Things that accompany** , [ ***echomena*** (G2192) ***sooteerias*** (G4991)] - 'things that hold by;' i:e., are linked unto salvation (cf. Heb 6:19). In opposition to "nigh unto cursing."

**Though** , [ ***ei-kai*** (G1499)] - 'if even we thus speak.' 'It is better to make you afraid with words, that ye suffer not in fact' (Chrysostom).

## Matthew Henry

### vv. 1-8

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Advancement in Holiness; First Principles.* | A. D. 62. |

      1 Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God,   2 Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.   3 And this will we do, if God permit.   4 For *it is* impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost,   5 And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come,   6 If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put *him* to an open shame.   7 For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God:   8 But that which beareth thorns and briers *is* rejected, and *is* nigh unto cursing; whose end *is* to be burned.

       We have here the apostle's advice to the Hebrews--that they would grow up from a state of childhood to the fullness of the stature of the new man in Christ. He declares his readiness to assist them all he could in their spiritual progress; and, for their greater encouragement, he puts himself with them: *Let us go on.* Here observe, In order to their growth, Christians must leave the principles of the doctrine of Christ. How must they leave them? They must not lose them, they must not despise them, they must not forget them. They must lay them up in their hearts, and lay them as the foundation of all their profession and expectation; but they must not rest and stay in them, they must not be always laying the foundation, they must go on, and build upon it. There must be a superstructure; for the foundation is laid on purpose to support the building. Here it may be enquired, Why did the apostle resolve to set strong meat before the Hebrews, when he knew they were but babes? *Answer.* 1. Though some of them were but weak, yet others of them had gained more strength; and they must be provided for suitably. And, as those who are grown Christians must be willing to hear the plainest truths preached for the sake of the weak, so the weak must be willing to hear the more difficult and mysterious truths preached for the sake of those who are strong. 2. He hoped they would be growing in their spiritual strength and stature, and so be able to digest stronger meat.

       I. The apostle mentions several foundation-principles, which must be well laid at first, and then built upon; neither his time nor theirs must be spent in laying these foundations over and over again. These foundations are six:--

       1. Repentance from dead works, that is, conversion and regeneration, repentance from a spiritually dead state and course; as if he had said, "Beware of destroying the life of grace in your souls; your minds were changed by conversion, and so were your lives. Take care that you return not to sin again, for then you must have the foundation to lay again; there must be a second conversion a repenting not only of, but from, dead works." Observe here, (1.) The sins of persons unconverted are dead works; they proceed from persons spiritually dead, and they tend to death eternal. (2.) Repentance for dead works, if it be right, is repentance from dead works, a universal change of heart and life. (3.) Repentance for and from dead works is a foundation-principle, which must not be laid again, though we must renew our repentance daily.

       2. Faith towards God, a firm belief of the existence of God, of his nature, attributes, and perfections, the trinity of persons in the unity of essence, the whole mind and will of God as revealed in his word, particularly what relates to the Lord Jesus Christ. We must by faith acquaint ourselves with these things; we must assent to them, we must approve of them, and apply all to ourselves with suitable affections and actions. Observe, (1.) Repentance from dead works, and faith towards God, are connected, and always go together; they are inseparable twins, the one cannot live without the other. (2.) Both of these are foundation-principles, which should be once well laid, but never pulled up, so as to need to be laid over again; we must not relapse into infidelity.

       3. The doctrine of baptisms, that is, of being baptized by a minister of Christ with water, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, as the initiating sign or seal of the covenant of grace, strongly engaging the person so baptized to get acquainted with the new covenant, to adhere to it, and prepare to renew it at the table of the Lord and sincerely to regulate himself according to it, relying upon the truth and faithfulness of God for the blessings contained in it. And the doctrine of an inward baptism, that of the Spirit sprinkling the blood of Christ upon the soul, for justification, and the graces of the Spirit for sanctification. This ordinance of baptism is a foundation to be rightly laid, and daily remembered, but not repeated.

       4. Laying on of hands, on persons passing solemnly from their initiated state by baptism to the confirmed state, by returning the answer of a good conscience towards God, and sitting down at the Lord's table. This passing from incomplete to complete church membership was performed by laying on of hands, which was extraordinary conveyance of the gift of the Holy Ghost continued. This, once done, all are obliged to abide by, and not to need another solemn admission, as at first, but to go on, and grow up, in Christ. Or by this may be meant ordination of persons to the ministerial office, who are duly qualified for it and inclined to it; and this by fasting and prayer, with laying on of the hands of the presbytery: and this is to be done but once.

       5. The resurrection of the dead, that is, of dead bodies; and their re-union with their souls, to be eternal companions together in weal or woe, according as their state was towards God when they died, and the course of life they led in this world.

       6. Eternal judgment, determining the soul of every one, when it leaves the body at death, and both soul and body at the last day, to their eternal state, every one to his proper society and employment to which they were entitled and fitted here on earth; the wicked to everlasting punishment, the righteous to life eternal.

       These are the great foundation-principles which ministers should clearly and convincingly unfold, and closely apply. In these the people should be well instructed and established, and from these they must never depart; without these, the other parts of religion have no foundation to support them.

       II. The apostle declares his readiness and resolution to assist the Hebrews in building themselves up on these foundations till they arrive at perfection: *And this we will do, if God permit,* *v.* 3. And thereby he teaches them, 1. That right resolution is very necessary in order to progress and proficiency in religion. 2. That that resolution is right which is not only made in the sincerity of our hearts, but in a humble dependence upon God for strength, for assistance and righteousness, for acceptance, and for time and opportunity. 3. That ministers should not only teach people what to do, but go before them, and along with them, in the way of duty.

       III. He shows that this spiritual growth is the surest way to prevent that dreadful sin of apostasy from the faith. And here,

       1. He shows how far persons may go in religion, and, after all, fall away, and perish for ever, Heb 6:4; Heb 6:5. (1.) They may be *enlightened.* Some of the ancients understand this of their being baptized; but it is rather to be understood of notional knowledge and common illumination, of which persons may have a great deal, and yet come short of heaven. ***Balaam was the man whose eyes were opened* (****Num. xxiv. 3****), and yet with his eyes opened he went down to utter darkness.** (2.) They may *taste of the* ***heavenly gift,* feel something of the efficacy of the Holy Spirit** in his operations upon their souls, causing them to taste something of religion, and yet be like persons in the market, who taste of what they will not come up to the price of, and so but take a taste, and leave it. Persons may taste religion, and seem to like it, if they could have it upon easier terms than denying themselves, and taking up their cross, and following Christ. (3.) They may be *made partakers of the Holy Ghost,* that is, of his extraordinary and miraculous gifts; they may have cast out devils in the name of Christ, and done many other mighty works. Such gifts in the apostolic age were sometimes bestowed upon those who had no true saving grace. (4.) They may *taste of the good word of God;* they may have some relish of gospel doctrines, may hear the word with pleasure, may remember much of it, and talk well of it, and yet never be cast into the form and mould of it, nor have it dwelling richly in them. (5.) They may have *tasted of the powers of the world to come;* they may have been under strong impressions concerning heaven, and dread of going to hell. These lengths hypocrites may go, and, after all, turn apostates. Now hence observe, [1.] These great things are spoken here of those who may fall away; yet **it is not here said of them that they were truly converted, or that they were justified; there is more in true saving grace than in all that is here said of apostates.** [2.] **This therefore is no proof of the final apostasy of true saints.** These indeed may fall frequently and foully, but yet they will not totally nor finally from God; the purpose and the power of God, the purchase and the prayer of Christ, the promise of the gospel, the everlasting covenant that God has made with them, ordered in all things and sure, the indwelling of the Spirit, and the immortal seed of the word, these are their security. But the tree that has not these roots will not stand.

       2. The apostle describes the dreadful case of such as fall away after having gone so far in the profession of the religion. (1.) The greatness of the sin of apostasy. It is *crucifying the Son of God afresh, and putting him to open shame.* **They declare that they approve of what the Jews did in crucifying Christ, and that they would be glad to do the same thing again if it were in their power.** They pour the greatest contempt upon the Son of God, and therefore upon God himself, who expects all should reverence his Son, and honour him as they honour the Father. They do what in them lies to represent Christ and Christianity as a shameful thing, and would have him to be a public shame and reproach. This is the nature of apostasy. (2.) The great misery of apostates. [1.] It is impossible to renew them again unto repentance. It is extremely hazardous. Very few instances can be given of those who have gone so far and fallen away, and yet ever have been brought to true repentance, such a repentance as is indeed a renovation of the soul. Some have thought this is the sin against the Holy Ghost, but without ground. The sin here mentioned is plainly apostasy both from the truth and the ways of Christ. **God can renew them to repentance, but he seldom does it; and with men themselves it is impossible.** [2.] Their misery is exemplified by a proper similitude, taken from the ground that after much cultivation brings forth nothing but briers and thorns; *and therefore is nigh unto cursing, and its end is to be burned,* *v.* 8. To give this the greater force here is observed the difference that there is between the good ground and the bad, that these contraries, being set one over against the other, illustrate each other. *First* Here is a description of the good ground: It *drinketh in the rain that cometh often upon it.* **Believers do not only taste of the word of God, but they drink it in; and this good ground bringeth forth fruit answerable to the cost laid out,** for the honour of Christ and the comfort of his faithful ministers, who are, under Christ, dressers of the ground. And this fruit-field or garden receives the blessing. God declares fruitful Christians blessed, and all wise and good men account them blessed: they are blessed with increase of grace, and with further establishment and glory at last. *Secondly,* Here is the different case of the bad ground: It *bears briers and thorns;* it is not only barren of good fruit, but fruitful in that which is bad, briers and thorns, fruitful in sin and wickedness, which are troublesome and hurtful to all about them, and will be most so to sinners themselves at last; and then such ground is rejected. God will concern himself no more about such wicked apostates; he will let them alone, and cast them out of his care; **he will command the clouds that they rain no more upon them.** Divine influences shall be restrained; and that is not all, but such ground *is nigh unto cursing;* so far is it from receiving the blessing, that a dreadful curse hangs over it, though as yet, through the patience of God, the curse is not fully executed. *Lastly,* Its end is to be burned. Apostasy will be punished with everlasting burnings, the fire that shall never be quenched. This is the sad end to which apostasy leads, and therefore Christians should go on and grow in grace, lest, if they do not go forward, they should go backward, till they bring matters to this woeful extremity of sin and misery.

## Bob Utly

### vv. 1-8

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT:** **HEBREWS 6:1-8** **1Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, 2of instruction about washings and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. 3And this we will do, if God permits. 4For 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, 5and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6and *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. 7For ground that drinks the rain which often falls on it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; 8but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.**

**6:1-2** This list of doctrines relates to issues shared by Judaism and Christianity. However, they are primarily Jewish (i.e., washings and laying on of hands). These would be doctrines that believing and unbelieving Jews would agree on easily. They are not the important theological issues related to Jesus of Nazareth as the prophesied Messiah.

There is a plausible theory that the first phrase should translate *archç* (elementary teachings) as "origins of the Messiah" (cf. A. B. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 197). Could it be that a group of Jews were disillusioned with the growing Gentile flavor of Christianity and were questioning how Jesus had fulfilled OT prophecy and expectations? Could the list of Jewish doctrines be the focus of a discussion about a possible return to the Mosaic covenant for salvation, instead of Jesus?

**6:1**

**NASB, NJB "elementary teachings about the Christ"
NKJV "the discussion of the elementary *principles* of Christ"
NRSV "the basic teachings about Christ"
TEV "the first lessons of the Christian message"**

The Greek term *archç* has a large semantical field (see Special Topic at Heb. 3:14). The basic thrust is the beginning of some thing (the first cause of authority/rule). It is the contextual opposite of *teleios* ("maturity" Heb. 6:1b).

The problem of understanding this phrase is that the principles enumerated in Heb. 6:1-2 do not relate to the Messiah as much as traditional teachings of Judaism. This is one of the textual reason for the supposition that the book was written to a Jewish synagogue audience (cf. Heb. 10:25) of both believing and unbelieving Jews (cf. R. C. Graze, *No Easy Salvation*).

**▣ "let us press on"** This is a present passive subjunctive, "let us be borne." The focus is on the continual provision by a divine agent! They will advance toward maturity if they allow the Spirit the freedom to motivate them. This very Greek term was used by the Pythagorean philosophers for advancing to a higher stage of understanding (cf. A. T. Robertson's *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, p. 373).

**NASB, TEV "maturity"
NKJV, NRSV "perfection"
NJB "completion"**

This is a form of the Greek term *teleios*, which is used only here in the NT. See Special Topic at Heb. 7:11. It is the contextual opposite of *archç* of Heb. 6:1a (basic principles). These believers must move beyond those theological topics which they have in common with their Jewish friends and co-worshipers.

**▣ "repentance. . .faith"** These are the old and new covenant obligations, one negative and one positive. Repentance is a difficult topic because of the confusion over its meaning. The Hebrew term reflects a change of action while the Greek term reflects a change of mind. Repentance is the turning from a self-centered, self-directed life to a God-centered, God-directed life.

1. Jesus connected lack of repentance with perishing (cf. Luke 13:3,5 and 2 Pet. 3:9)

2. repentance is linked as the companion obligation to faith (cf. Mark 1:15; Acts 2:38, 41; 3:16; 19; 20:21)

3. God is even affirmed as being the source of repentance (cf. Acts 5:31; 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25)

**6:2** **"washings"** The plural is never used for Christian baptism, but for OT ceremonial ablutions (cf. Mark 7:4; Heb. 9:10). These three pairs of doctrines are not uniquely Christian. They seem to be common doctrines with Judaism, particularly those which Pharisees shared with Christianity.

**▣ "laying on of hands"** This is used in several senses in the OT and NT. It shows association with

1. setting one aside to God's chosen task (cf. Num. 27:18,23; Deut. 34:9; Acts 6:6; 13:3; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim. 1:6)

2. identifying with a sacrifice

a. priest (cf. Exod.29:10,15,19; Lev. 16:21; Num. 8:12)

b. laypersons (cf. Lev. 1:4; 3:2,8; 4:4,15,24; 2 Chr. 29:23

3. identifying with a stoning victim (cf. Lev. 24:14)

4. praying for blessing (cf. Matt. 19:13,15)

5. praying for healing (cf. Matt. 9:18; Mark 5:23; 6:5; 7:32; 8:23; 16:18; Luke 4:40; 13:13; Acts 9:17; 28:8)

6. praying for receiving the Spirit (cf. Acts 8:17-19; 19:6)

**▣ "the resurrection. . .eternal judgment"** The Pharisees and Essenes (i.e., the Dead Sea Scrolls community) held these eschatological doctrines in common with Christianity.

[**SPECIAL TOPIC: ETERNAL**](http://www.freebiblecommentary.org/special_topics/eternal.html)

**6:3** **"if"** This is a third class conditional sentence which means potential action. God will permit, if they will cooperate!

**6:4-6****a "have once been. . .have tasted. . .have been made. . .have tasted. . .falling away"** All of these participles are aorists, while Heb. 6:6b begins a series of present tense verbs. These are such strong statements. The meaning seems to be clear: **they knew God on some level, but they rejected full faith in Christ.** However, two contextual issues need to be examined: (1) the presence of three groups ("us" [vv. 1-3], "those" [vv. 4-8], "you" [vv. 9-12]) and (2) the Jewish nature of the doctrines in Heb. 6:1-2. These point toward a synagogue in which believing and unbelieving Jews worshiped and studied together. The **unbelieving Jews have clearly seen the power, glory, and truth of the gospel in the Scriptures and in the testimony and changed lives of their believing friends.**

There seem to be two warnings in Hebrews: (1) to the believing Jews to take their public stand with the persecuted church and not turn back to Judaism and (2) to the unbelieving Jews to embrace Christ. In many ways the first warning is unique to this book, but the second is very similar to the unpardonable sin of the Pharisees in the Gospels and the sin unto death of the false teachers in 1 John.

**6:5** **"the powers of the age to come"** Another example of **the lost involved in the power of the age to come** is in Matt. 7:21-23. They had power without the necessary personal relationship. This same thing could be said of **Judas Iscariot** (in the Gospels), **Simon Magnus** (in Acts), and the false teachers (cf. 1 John 2:18-19).

See special topic at Heb. 1:2.

**▣** **"have fallen away"** This is an aorist active participle. This is the theological climax of the Greek sentence that begins in Heb. 6:4. See Special Topic: Apostasy at Heb. 3:12.

**6:6**

**NASB "and *then*"
NKJV "if"
NRSV, TEV "and then"
NJB "And yet in spite of this"**

There is a disagreement among Greek scholars whether this is a mild conditional structure or a consistent parallel structure from verse 4. **Those who insist on a conditional structure do so for the theological purpose of asserting that verse** **6****a is a hypothetical situation.** However, all these grammatical features imply that all have occurred.

1. the repetitive pattern of aorist participles (been enlightened, tasted, shared, tasted and fell away)

2. the repetitive use of "*kai*" (and) with the last three

3. the one accusative masculine plural article in Heb. 6:4 which relates to all the participles of verses 4-6

**NASB, TEV,
NJB "impossible"
NKJV, NRSV "impossible"**

The term appears in Heb. 6:4, but the larger context includes Heb. 6:6. This is the Greek term *dunatos* (able) with the alpha privative (unable). These two terms are used with the connotation of what God does and does not do! It is used in the Greek Papyri found in Egypt of (1) men not strong enough to work and (2) witnesses unable to testify. It is used four times in Hebrews.

1. impossible to renew them again to repentance (6:4)

2. impossible for God to lie (6:18)

3. impossible for OT sacrifices to save (10:4)

4. without faith it is impossible to please God (11:6)

In each case the term means impossible. Therefore, it is surprising that Lowe and Nida's *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament* says "In Heb. 6.4 the use of *adunaton* seems to be an instance of hyperbole in view of the warnings against apostasy (see Heb. 5.11-6.12). Therefore, one may translate *adunaton* in Heb. 6.4 as 'it is extremely difficult to'" (p. 669). This seems more theological than lexical when all other uses of the word in Hebrews demand "impossible."

The reluctance to take this term literally is because it leads to the theology of "once out always out" if this refers to believers abandoning their faith. Those denominational groups that teach apostasy also preach repentance and reinstatement. This text seems to depreciate this position.

In many ways the historical setting is the key to the interpretation.

1. two groups addressed (believing and non-believing Jews)

2. one group (believing Jews who have not matured and are now contemplating returning to Moses)

This is a similar heresy to the Judaizers in Galatians who were tempted to trust in OT rites (plus Christ). Paul asserts that they had fallen from grace (cf. Gal. 5:4).

**▣** **"renew"** See Special Topic following.

[**SPECIAL TOPIC: Renew *(ANAKAINÔSIS)***](http://www.freebiblecommentary.org/special_topics/renew.html)

**▣ "they again crucify to themselves"** The Greek compound (*anastauroô*) can mean "crucify" (or "nail up," this intensified form is in JB, NEB and Moffatt translations) or "crucify again" (NASB, NKJV, NRSV, TEB, NJB, NIV translations). *The Greek-English-Lexicon of the New Testament* by Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, says "in extra-biblical Greek this term always means *crucify*" (p. 61). Tertullian used this passage to assert that post baptismal sins were not forgivable.

The early Greek Fathers understood this context and the compound with *ana* to demand "crucify again," which is followed by the majority of modern English translations. How does this relate theologically to apostasy? It implies believers; however, if the intensified form "personally nail up" is followed, then unbelievers are possibly the referent. Interpreters must allow the text, not their theological biases or theological systems, to speak. This text is so difficult to interpret definitively. Often we think we know what it should or should not mean before we struggle with

1. the book as a whole

2. the four warnings specifically

3. the specific context

However one interprets these texts, the warnings are serious!

**▣ "put Him to open shame"** This term is used in Matt. 1:19 for Joseph's not wanting to publicly disgrace Mary. How would this relate to the context? It may simply refer to Jesus' initial crucifixion as "public shame" without the implied "again."

**6:8** This may be an illustration taken from Gen. 3:17-19 or Isa. 5:1-2 or possibly even the parable of the soils in Matthew 13. Fruit-bearing is the normal evidence of a valid profession! Fruit-bearing (cf. John 15:5-6), not germination, is the evidence of a true relationship with Christ. The fruit is the evidence of, not the means to!

### vv. 9-12

**NASB (UPDATED) TEXT:** **HEBREWS 6:9-12** **9But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way. 10For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. 11And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, 12so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.**

**6:9** **"beloved"** This paragraph shows the intense love and care that the author has for the readers. Verse 11 mentions (1) "desire," which could be translated "great desire" and (2) "each one of you," which shows individual concern.

**▣ "we are convinced of better things concerning you"** This is a perfect passive indicative plural. The author was confident that this group of readers were Christians and would continue to act appropriately.

For "better" see full note at Heb. 7:7.

**NASB, NKJV "things that accompany salvation"
NRSV "things that belong to salvation"
TEV "that belong to your salvation"
NJB "on the way to salvation"**

This Greek phrase is literally "having (present middle participle) salvation" which defines the "better things" of Heb. 6:9.

**6:10** **"so as to forget your work"** God will judge fairly based on

1. the book of life (cf. Exod. 32:32-33; Ps. 69:28; Dan. 12:1; Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12,15; 21:27)

2. the book of deeds (cf. Ps. 56:8; 139:16; Isa. 65:6; Mal. 3:16; Matt. 25:31-46; Gal. 6:7)

**▣ "the love which you have shown toward His name in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints"** Although these believing Jews had not fully identified with the Church, they did help the Church in its time of persecution (cf. Heb. 10:32-34). Remember the Synagogue was considered legal, while the church was illegal in Roman law of this period!

"Saints" (*hagioi*) is theologically related to the OT term "holy" (*kadash*), which meant "set apart for God's service" (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Rom. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1). It is always plural in the NT except for one time in Philippians 4:21; even there, it is used in a corporate context. To be saved is to be part of the covenant community of faith, the family of believers.

God's people are holy because of the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ (cf. Romans 4 and 2 Cor. 5:21). It is God's will that they live holy lives (cf. Eph. 1:4; 2:10; 4:1; 5:27; James 2:14-26; 1 Pet. 1:16). Believers are both declared holy (positional sanctification) and called to a lifestyle of holiness (progressive sanctification). This is typical of the NT theological tension between the "already of the Kingdom of God" and the "not yet of the Kingdom of God."

[**SPECIAL TOPIC: SAINTS**](http://www.freebiblecommentary.org/special_topics/saints.html)

**6:11** **"full assurance"** Notice this is related to lifestyle action (cf. James, 1 Peter, and 1 John). Assurance is not primarily a doctrine to affirm, but a life to live (cf. Matt. 7).

**▣ "until the end"** Perseverance is as true a biblical doctrine as security. By their fruits you shall know them (cf. Matt. 7; James 2:14-26). See note on perseverance at Heb. 4:14, also note Special Topic at Heb. 7:11.

**6:12** **"sluggish"** This is the same term as "dull" (cf. Heb. 5:11). It is used in contrast to "diligence" in Heb. 6:11. The believers had not grown into Christlikeness nor Great Commission Christians as they should have (cf. Heb. 12:1-3).

**▣ "imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises"** This may alude to the roll call of the faithful in chapter 11. These faithful OT believers held out to the end amidst great conflicts and trials, often resulting in physical death (cf. often in chapter 11 and possibly in Heb. 12:4). God's promises are the focus of the paragraph, 6:13-20. They are sure and faithful because He is sure and faithful!

[**SPECIAL TOPIC: BELIEVERS' INHERITANCE**](http://www.freebiblecommentary.org/special_topics/believers_inheritance.html)

## Sam Storms

### Hebrews 6:4-6 And The Possibility Of Apostasy

[http://www.samstorms.com/all-articles/post/hebrews-6:4-6-and-the-possibility-of-apostasy](http://www.samstorms.com/all-articles/post/hebrews-6%3A4-6-and-the-possibility-of-apostasy)

This is undoubtedly one of the most controversial and frequently debated passages in all of Scripture. It would not be going too far to say that those who believe a genuine believer can forfeit (or lose) his/her salvation appeal to this passage more often than any other. Read the passage closely.

Who are these people who “have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away”? It is important for us to know because “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.”

There are probably a dozen or more interpretive options of this passage that may be found in the commentaries and journal literature. It isn’t my purpose to interact with them here. Rather, I am focusing solely on the question of whether the terminology in vv. 4-5 would lead us to conclude that these individuals were born-again, justified, believers.

Are these born-again Christian men and women? If so, the doctrine of eternal security is shattered. Or is it possible for a person to experience some form of spiritual “enlightenment” and to “taste” spiritual blessings and to “partake” of the Holy Spirit and yet never know Jesus in a saving way? I believe the answer to this latter question is Yes. Let me begin by giving six reasons from the book of Hebrews itself why these people are *not* born-again believers who have apostatized.

First, the situation described in vv. 4-6 is illustrated in vv. 7-8. There we read, “For ground that drinks the **rain which often falls upon it** [**this drinking of frequent rains refers to the blessings of vv. 4-5:** enlightenment, partaking of the HS, tasting spiritual blessings, etc.] and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; but if it yields **thorns and thistles [this corresponds to the “falling away”** of v. 6a], it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.”

Rain falls on all kinds of ground, but one cannot tell from that alone what kind of vegetation, if any, will appear. The picture here is not of ground that receives frequent rain, yields life and vegetation, and then loses it. The picture is of two different kinds of ground altogether. **One responds to the rain [spiritual blessings and opportunities] by producing bountiful vegetation**, while the **other is barren, lifeless, and thus condemned.** Likewise, people who hear the gospel and respond with saving faith bring forth life. Others, however, who sit in church and hear the truth and are blessed by the ministry of the HS but eventually turn their back on it all are like a field that never yields vegetation and thus comes into judgment.

As Wayne Grudem notes,

“the idea of land that **once bore good fruit and now bears thorns is not compatible with this picture**. The implication is this: While the positive experiences listed in verses 4-6 do not provide us enough information to know whether the people were truly saved or not, the committing of apostasy and holding Christ up to contempt do reveal the true nature of those who fall away: **all along they have been like bad ground that can only bear bad fruit.** If the metaphor of the thorn-bearing land explains verses 4-6 (as it surely does), then their falling away shows that they were never saved in the first place” (“Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study from Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Other Warning Passages in Hebrews,” in *Still Sovereign,*Baker; 156-57).

Second, in 6:9 we read of a significant contrast: “But beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking this way.” The “better things” in view are stated in vv. 10-12, things like “work” and “love” and “ministry” and “diligence” and “full assurance of hope” and “faith” and “patience” and “inheriting the promises.” These “things” are “better” than the experiences of vv. 4-6 precisely because they “belong to” or “accompany” *salvation*. In other words, “the author says he is confident that most of his readers have better things than the people he described in verses 4-6, and *these things are better in that his readers also have things that belong to salvation*. This implies that the blessings in verses 4-6 were not things that belong to salvation” (Grudem, 159).

Before going further, let’s summarize vv. 7-12. “Verses 7-8 describe the people in verses 4-6 as unfruitful land that repeatedly bears thorns and thistles, and thus indicate that they were never saved. Verses 9-12 say that the readers, in general, have better things than the temporary experiences of vv. 4-6, and that those better things include salvation. Therefore both verses 7-8 and verse 9 indicate that the people in verses 4-6 who fell away never had salvation” (Grudem, 160).]

Third, according to [Hebrews 3:14](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Hebrews%203.14) (and 3:6), “we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.” Note well: he says **we “*have become*” partakers of Christ,** not “will become” or “are now partakers,” if we persevere in faith. In other words, holding fast in faith, i.e., persevering, proves that you *became* a partaker of Christ in the past. Failing to hold fast, i.e., apostatizing from the faith, proves that you *never were* a partaker of Christ. Apostasy or falling away (6:6a) doesn’t mean you once were in and have now fallen out of partaking in Christ. It means you never were or never became a partaker in the first place.

Fourth, we read in [Hebrews 10:14](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Hebrews%2010.14) that “by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.” Here we are told that for those who are now being sanctified (i.e., indwelt by the HS, 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](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Hebrews%206.6)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” (John Piper, Sermon, 5).

Fifth, our author concludes this letter with a prayer relating to the fulfillment in us of the blessings of the New Covenant. He prays that God would “equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ” (13:20-21). The promise of the new and “eternal” covenant is that God will put in his people a new heart and cause them to walk in His ways and not turn away from doing them good (see [Ezek. 11:19](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ezek.%2011.19); [36:27](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ezek%2036.27); [Jer. 24:7](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Jer.%2024.7); [32:40](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Jer%2032.40)). Thus, Piper concludes that

“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](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Hebrews%206.6) 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” (Piper, 5).

Sixth, we must take note not just of what is said of these people in vv. 4-6 but **what is *not* said of them that is usually said of Christians.** Typical terms used to describe believers, such as regeneration, conversion, justified, adopted, elect, faith in Jesus, are conspicuous by their absence. This is more than merely an argument from silence when we consider the way Christians are described in *the book of Hebrews itself*. Here is a listing of what is true of the true believer, all of which are absent from the description of those who apostatize in 6:4-6.

(1) God has **forgiven their sins** (10:17; 8:12)

(2) God has **cleansed their consciences** (9:14; 10:22)

(3) God has written his laws on their hearts (8:10; 10:16)

(4) God is producing holiness of life in them (2:11; 10:14; 13:21)

(5) God has given them an unshakable kingdom (12:28)

(6) God is pleased with them (chp. 11; 13:16,21)

(7) **They have faith** (4:3; 6:12; 10:22,38,39; 12:2; 13:7; etc.)

(8) **They have hope** (6:11,18; 7:19; 10:23)

(9) They have love (6:10; 10:33-34; 13:1)

(10) They worship and pray (12:28; 13:15; 4:16; 10:22)

(11) They obey God (5:9; 10:36; 12:10,11,14)

(12) **They persevere** (3:6,14; 6:11; 10:23)

(13) They enter God’s rest (4:3,11)

(14) They know God (8:11)

(15) They are God’s house, his children, his people (3:6; 2:10,13; 8:10)

(16) They share in Christ (3:14)

(17) They will receive future salvation (1:14; 7:25; 5:9; 9:28).

Someone might object by saying: “O.K., typical descriptions of the saved are not found in 6:4-6, but neither are typical descriptions of the lost found there either!” Grudem responds: “I agree that the phrases [in 6:4-6] alone do not match the author’s descriptions of the lost, and they do not indicate that these people are lost (before they commit apostasy). But that is just the point: ***Before they commit apostasy their spiritual status is uncertain*.** It remains to be seen whether they are among the saved or the lost. **They have not yet given decisive indications either way.** That is the reason the author warns them not to turn away – they are still at a point where a decision to be among the saved or the lost must be made” (171).

What about the terms used in 6:4-5 (enlightenment, tasting, partakers, etc.)? On the one hand, it is certainly the case that all Christians experience these realities. But do *only* Christians experience them? Or is it possible for these experiences also to be true of people who have been repeatedly exposed to the gospel and to the benefits it brings, yet without personally embracing the person of Christ as Lord and Savior? Let’s look at each one in turn.

*They have “once been enlightened”* – Have true Christians been “enlightened”? Yes. But this term need mean no more than to hear the gospel, to learn or to understand. “Certainly such intellectual understanding of the facts of the gospel is an important step toward saving faith, but it does not itself constitute the element of personal trust in Christ that is essential to faith” (Grudem, 142-43). All of us know people, perhaps family members, who have been repeatedly exposed to the truth of the gospel, understand what it means, can articulate the claims of Christ with incredible precision, yet refuse to put their trust in Him as Lord and Savior. Thus, whereas all true Christians have been enlightened, **not all those who are enlightened are true Christians**.

*They have “tasted of the heavenly gift” and “the good word of God” and “the powers of the age to come”* – This certainly points to a genuine spiritual experience. But must we conclude that it was a genuine *saving* experience? These are not strangers to the gospel or to the church. These are people who have come under conviction of the HS, who have experienced some degree of blessing both through common grace and through their close, intimate contact with genuine believers. Perhaps they have been healed. Perhaps a demon has been cast out. They have heard the Word of God and have come to taste and feel and enjoy something of its power and beauty and truth. They have felt the “wooing” of the HS and have seen great and wonderful things in the body of Christ. Those in [Matthew 7:22-23](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matthew%207.22-23) preached, prophesied, performed miracles, and cast out demons in Christ’s name . . . *but were not saved*. Jesus said to them: “I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers” (v. 23). These, then, “have tasted” the power and blessings of the new covenant, but ***they have not personally prized, cherished, embraced, loved, trusted, treasured, or savored the atoning death of Jesus as their only hope for eternal life*.**

*They have been made “partakers of the Holy Spirit”* – Whereas the word translated “partaker” can certainly refer to a saving participation in Christ (cf. Heb. 3:14), it can also refer to a looser association or participation. See Luke 5:7; Heb. 1:9 (“comrades” or “companions”). These people had in some way come to share in some aspect of the HS and his ministry. But in what way? Must we conclude that it was a “saving” way? Why does our author *not* use terminology that would put the question of their spiritual status to rest, such as “filled with” or “baptized in” or “indwelt by” the Holy Spirit?

*They have in some sense “repented”* – There is a “**sorrow for sins**” and a turning from them that even non-believers can experience. This is clear from [Heb. 12:7](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb.%2012.7) and the reference to **Esau**, as well as the “repentance” of **Judas Iscariot** in [Mt. 27:3](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mt.%2027.3). Paul refers to a repentance “without regret that leads to salvation,” the implication being that there is a repentance that does *not* lead to salvation. As with “belief” and “faith”, so too with “repentance,” we must always distinguish between what is substantial and saving, on the one hand, and what is spurious on the other.

Wayne Grudem provides this helpful summation:

“What has happened to these people? They are at least people who have been affiliated closely with the fellowship of the church. They have had some sorrow for sin and a decision to forsake their sin (*repentance*). They have clearly understood the gospel and given some assent to it (they have been *enlightened*). They have come to appreciate the attractiveness of the Christian life and the change that comes about in people’s lives because of becoming a Christian, and they have probably had answers to prayers in their own lives and felt the power of the Holy Spirit at work, perhaps even using some spiritual gifts (they have become ‘associated with’ the work of the Holy Spirit or have become*partakers* of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the heavenly gift and the powers of the age to come). They have been exposed to the true preaching of the Word and have appreciated much of its teachings (they have *tasted* the goodness of the Word of God). These factors are all positive, and people who have experienced these things may be genuine Christians. But these factors alone are not enough to give conclusive evidence of any of the decisive beginning stages of the Christian life (regeneration, saving faith and repentance unto life, justification, adoption, initial sanctification). In fact, *these experiences are all preliminary to those decisive beginning stages of the Christian life*. The actual spiritual status of those who have experienced these things is still unclear” (153).

I conclude that the people described in 6:4-5 who, according to v. 6, “fall away” are not now and never were born-again believers. They are not Christians who have “lost” their salvation.

I believe the spiritual state and experience of those described in [Hebrews 6:4-6](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Hebrews%206.4-6) is virtually identical to that of the first three of four soils in the parable of the sower (see [Matthew 13:3-23](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matthew%2013.3-23);[Mark 4:1-9](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%204.1-9); [Luke 8:4-15](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%208.4-15)). In that parable, only the fourth soil is called “good” and subsequently bears fruit. The other three represent those who hear the gospel and respond with varying degrees of understanding, interest, and joy, none of which, however, bear fruit that would testify of genuine spiritual life. That is to say, they experienced “enlightenment” and “tasted” the goodness and power of the ministry of the Spirit and the blessings of the kingdom, yet turned their back on the truth when trials, troubles, or temptations came their way. Their apostasy was proof of the falsity of their initial “faith” (see esp. [John 8:31](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/John%208.31); [Heb. 3:6](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb.%203.6),[14](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%203.14); [1 John 2:19](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20John%202.19)).

## Ligon J. Duncan

<http://ligonduncan.com/falling-away-760/>

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Hebrews chapter 6 as we continue our way through this letter. And as you know, this is one of the great warning passages of Hebrews 6. Hebrews 6 verses 4 to 8, and then again that passage in Hebrews 10:1, comprise two of the most terrifying warning passages in all the Scriptures. David Martyn Lloyd Jones, the famous preacher in London, England, said that he had seen over the course of thirty-five years ministry more Christians caused to struggle with their assurance because of misunderstanding this passage than perhaps any other passage in Scripture. He said, “It's not that this is the hardest passage in Scripture to interpret; it's not. There are other passages that are harder to interpret than this one. It's that this passage of Scripture has had a unique power when misunderstood to unsettle the hearts of believers.” It's a very difficult passage. Partly it's difficult because respected, Protestant interpreters have disagreed on how to interpret this passage. Our Wesleyan and Methodist friends interpret this passage very differently than we do. They see this passage as one passage that shows that believers can lose their salvation. That's part of historic Wesleyan teaching. That's something that those of us who are Calvinistic in our belief don't accept. We believe in the perseverance of the saints, that once you have been redeemed by Christ, you have trusted in Him for salvation, have been united to Him by the work of the Holy Spirit, nothing can snatch you away from Him. But this is one of those passages where our Wesleyan friends disagree with us.

This passage is a hard passage because it says some things that are hard to understand. And very frankly, it says some things that are hard to swallow. And it forces us to do the hard work of doing personal, spiritual inventory. You really can't study this passage with detachment. And to study it spiritually is rather draining because it requires you to do heart examination. But my friends, this is the Word of God and He means it for the good of our souls and it is for the good of our souls. And so we don't want either to downplay the warnings we find here, nor to ignore the encouragements that we find in this passage. And we must remember something that I've tried to repeat regularly as we've worked our way through the book of Hebrews this time — the author of Hebrews is not aiming to unsettle the assurance of true believers. He's not sitting in his study saying, “What could I say to make real Christians doubt their salvation?” That's not his goal at all. These warnings are real. They come in the context of people in this congregation that are considering turning their backs on Jesus, leaving the Christian church, and going back to Judaism. And the warnings are being given specifically into that situation. He's not dealing with sincere Christians who are struggling with sin; that's a different issue. He's dealing with the issue of renouncing our confession of Christ, whether actually or functionally. And the warning is simply this — to renounce Christ is to step across a line from which you may never return. And so I don't want true believers to be inappropriately discouraged by this passage, but I don't want any of us to muffle the warning that is given here because the language of verses 4 to 6 makes all of us take stock of our faith in Christ.

Now I'd like you to look at the outline of the passage before we read it this morning and even before we pray so that you can be on the lookout for two or three things. First, in verses 4 to 6, he gives a warning, and the warning is against falling away from faith in Christ. Then he gives an illustration. You see that illustration in verses 7 and 8. The illustration is of fruitfulness and fruitlessness. His point is simply this — you cannot have faith in Christ and not have fruit and you cannot be faithless towards Christ and have fruit. In other words, it always shows whether you’re trusting in Christ. Trusting in Christ always has fruits and not trusting in Christ always has signs of fruitlessness.

And so verses 7 and 8 are an illustration of the principle. He's saying, “You can look at a person's life and you can see what really animates them.” It's like what Jesus meant when He said to the Pharisees and to His own disciples that, “out of a man's heart comes the issue of his speech and life.” In other words, Jesus is saying, “In the way you talk, in the way you live, you’re showing people a public snapshot of your heart” – what you really care about, what you really believe in, what's most important to you, what you believe the rule of living is. Jesus’ teaching is that our faith and our life go together. Our life is a witness to our faith. And the author of Hebrews is doing this, especially in this context, because the people who openly turn their backs on Jesus and leave are showing something that's going on in their heart.

And then finally, if you look in verses 9 to 12, he then turns to encouragement. And this word of encouragement is especially an encouragement for us to be diligent and to pursue assurance in Jesus. So we're warned against falling away from Jesus, an illustration of that is given — the warning is in verses 4 to 6, the illustration is in verses 7 to 8 — and then in verses 9 to 12 we have an encouragement. So be on the lookout for that as we read. Let's pray before we read God's Word.

*Heavenly Father, this is Your Word and though it is a hard passage, and though it is one of those passages that searches us, we pray that we would come to it willingly and readily, waiting to be taught from the words of life. Open our eyes to understand our own hearts, to see our own sin, but especially to see our Savior and to cling by faith to Him. This we ask in Jesus' name, amen.*

This is the Word of God. Hear it in Hebrews 6 beginning in verse 4:

“For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things — things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

Your faith in Jesus is the gauge of your Christian life. That is surely one of the great issues of this passage. It's a complex passage in some ways; it's a very simple and basic passage in others. In both the warning and the encouragement, what the author of Hebrews is doing — don't get lost in the details — is he's pushing you back to the issue of faith in Jesus. That's the touchstone of the Christian life. The dividing line; that's the gauge. That's the measure. Faith in Jesus is at the very center of the Christian life. And he's asking this congregation to take stock in their faith in Jesus. Some of them are tempted to turn their backs on Jesus. That is surely an indication that there's a problem of the heart in terms of their faith in Jesus. They don't adequately know who He is, understand what His claims are, believe on His person, trust in Him for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel. And so that's where the warning comes. He's speaking to the hearts of people who are wavering. And the encouragement is similar. The encouragement is to go on, to be diligent in pursuing Jesus — keep on believing in Jesus, and as you keep on believing in Jesus, come to a fuller assurance of your hope that you will inherit all the promises of God. So your faith in Jesus is the gauge of your Christian life.

Let me elaborate on that statement. Your faith in Jesus, your continuing faith in Jesus, and the fruit that comes from that faith is the gauge of the Christian life. And it, in fact, is the key to your perseverance and your assurance. You can't have assurance of faith in Jesus without faith in Jesus. You can't have assurance of the promises of God to you without faith in Jesus. You can't persevere in the Christian life without faith in Jesus. And the author of Hebrews is speaking to a congregation, some of whom are tempted to stop believing in Jesus, to turn their backs on Him, to walk away from the church, to walk away from Christianity, to walk away from Jesus, and to go to something that somebody is telling them is better. And so he is giving a very stern warning.

**THE WARNING AGAINST FALLING AWAY FROM FAITH IN CHRIST**

And so I want to look with you this morning at two parts of the passage — the warning and the encouragement. The warning you’ll find in verses 4 to 8 with the illustration of the warning in verses 7 and 8. So look especially at verses 4 to 6. In the warning, he is telling us of the danger of rejecting Jesus. The author of Hebrews does not want us to underestimate the danger to our souls of turning our backs on Jesus. And so this is what he's saying to us in verses 4 to 6 — “Don't turn your back on Jesus because there's no other hope of salvation.” What has he been arguing all the way up until this point in the letter? Really all the way up to chapter 5 verse 10 he's been saying, “Jesus is better. He's better than Moses, He's better than Aaron, He's better than the Old Testament sacrificial system. He is the best and only Savior that we could possibly have.” Now, in this warning section, what is he saying? “If that is who Jesus is and you turn your back on Him, what's the consequence?” And he says the consequence is curse; the consequence is burning, because if you turn your back on Jesus who is the better Savior, no sacrifice for your sin remains; no hope of your salvation remains. And so his warning here is for us not to turn our backs on Jesus because there's no other hope of salvation apart from Him.

Now let's look at the passage together because it's challenging. The author of Hebrews is warning against apostasy, against falling away from the truth. And we don't want to downplay that warning but we also don't want to misunderstand the warning. “It is impossible, in the case of those who have been once enlightened, who have tasted of the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit” — now that language is profoundly Christian language, isn't it? That whole part of the sentence has to do with the work of the Spirit in believers. It enlightened. Do you remember what Jesus says to Nicodemus? “You can't even see the kingdom of God unless the Holy Spirit opens your eyes.” So he says, for those who have been enlightened, for those who have tasted of the heavenly gift.” Again, this is a picture of God pouring out the gift of His Spirit; “and who have shared in the Holy Spirit.” It's profoundly Christian language. And then look at verse 5. “And have tasted of the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come.” So he uses strong language, Christian language, to describe this congregation.

Is he saying that real Christians, inhabited by the regenerating Holy Spirit, can fall away? No. Let me argue for this in two ways. It is clear here that the fulcrum of this argument, the thing on which it turns, is found in the next verses. Look at verse 6. “Since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.” In other words, whatever qualities these people possess, they are turning their back on Jesus and thus they are, as it were, joining the mockers in the crowd who mocked Him and denied who He was. Do you remember what the Romans had put over Jesus’ head? “The King of the Jews” and then they mocked Him. And he's saying, “If you reject Jesus, if you stop believing in Jesus, if you turn your back on Jesus, you have positioned yourself in the crowd mocking Jesus, holding Him in contempt.

And if you’ll look at the parallel passage, turn over with me if you would to Hebrews chapter 10. It's interesting how he puts it there. Verse 26 — “If we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.” And then look down to verse 29. “How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified and has outraged the Spirit of grace?” It's clear that their attitude towards Jesus is the fundamental thing that the author of Hebrews is getting at. In other words, these people have come to a point where they think that they can have God but reject Jesus. “I can have God, I can have the blessings of God, but I can reject Jesus.” And the author of Hebrews says that place is the place of damnation. If you think that you can have God and reject Jesus, you are sitting in the seat of damnation. If you are confident of your communion with God and you have rejected Jesus, you are deceived and you will be judged. That's the warning that's being given here. It all turns on their attitude towards Jesus.

So does that mean at one time they were truly united to Jesus by the Holy Spirit and then they lost that union with Jesus? No. Again, let me turn you to a parallel passage to help us here. Turn with me to 1 John chapter 2 verse 19, because a very similar situation is happening in that church that John is writing to. He's speaking about anti-Christs — people who are teaching things in place of Christ — and he gives this word of warning. 1 John 2:19 — “They went out from us” — he's talking about people who have left the congregation because they've followed the teaching of these antiChrists, plural — “They went out from us but they were not of us, for if they had been of us they would have continued with us, but they went out that it might become plain that they all are not of us.” Now that is a brilliant, short description of what has happened in that congregation. Some people have followed after the false teaching of the antiChrists and they have “gone out from us.” In other words, they have renounced their association with that Christian congregation.

But does John say, “And when they went out from us we discovered that though they once were of us, now they are no longer of us”? In other words, “Though they once were true believers, now they have lost that salvation.” That's not what John says. John says, “They went out from us, and thus we found out that they were never of us.” In other words, John is saying a true believer couldn't turn his back on Jesus. A true believer couldn't reject Jesus Christ. A true believer couldn't say, “I'm going to have communion with God and in fact I do have communion with God, and I reject Jesus.” You see, it all turns on Jesus. And this is not about true believers in Jesus ceasing to be believers in Jesus; this is about people who make a profession to be a believer and that profession turns out to be false. The language of Hebrews 6:4 and 5 is language that is designed to speak of the blessings that we have in the Christian community, but verse 6 indicates that it is possible to sit in the midst of the blessings of the Christian community and not really have faith in Christ.

That is so important for us to hear today. We sit under the faithful ministry of God's Word and we have in this congregation for 176 years. You know, I have been in so many wonderful evangelical churches where the Gospel is preached today but there was a time forty, fifty, sixty, seventy years ago when there were liberal preachers in those pulpits. I'm not sure I know a one where the entire preaching succession of the church's history has been faithful to the Word of God. You have been sitting under the faithful preaching of the Word of God for 176 years, First Presbyterian Church. What a huge blessing! You know it's possible to sit under the faithful preaching of the Word and not believe in Jesus, not put your trust in Him. It's not the fault of the preaching of the Word, it's not the fault of the deacons and the elders of the church and the women that are teaching Bible studies. It's a matter of the heart. Who do you trust? Where are you putting your faith? What do you really believe? The author of Hebrew is saying that these people that are turning their back on Jesus are showing that they never ever got it because you can't turn your back on Jesus and still have a sacrifice for sin that remains, he says in chapter 10. So this word of warning is very, very pertinent to us.

Maybe you've had friends like I've had who have said to me something like this. In the wake of a bad experience that they've had in the church — they've been burned somewhere in the local church. Somebody's betrayed them, somebody's let them down, they've had a horrible experience. Legitimately, they've had a horrible experience in their local church context but then they've said to me — it's chilling for me to even think of this — “I've tried Christianity, I've tried the church. I'm going on to something else. I'm still spiritual, I'm still religious, I still want God, but Christianity doesn't work for me anymore.” Have you ever had a friend say that to you? I have. That is exactly what the author of Hebrews is talking about here. You cannot walk away from Jesus and there not be eternal consequences. I'm not excusing the church. We can really mess things up, but that's not a reason to walk away from Jesus. Jesus is the one person you don't want to walk away from. And the author of Hebrews is simply pleading with these folks in the congregation. Again, think of it. He's not talking to the people that have already left, right? They’re not there to be talked to. “I know you’re used to preachers who preach to people that aren't here. You know, all the people who aren't here on Sunday and they really let them have it! Well they weren't here to hear you, preacher!” This is not that kind of a preacher. He's not shooting at the people who have already left; he's dealing with the people who are wavering in the congregation, who are wavering in their faith in Jesus. And he's saying, “Don't turn your back on Jesus. Don't walk away from Him. Keep believing in Jesus.” The whole of your faith turns on Jesus. Your relation to Him, your attitude towards Him, your belief in Him, your trust in Him — that's at the very heart of the Christian faith. Don't walk away from Jesus.

**AN ENCOURAGEMENT TO BE DILIGENT AND PURSUE ASSURANCE IN JESUS**

And it's clear that he doesn't want to undermine the assurance of true believers because of what he says in verses 9 to 12. Take a look at that. And that's the second thing that I want you to see today. Not only does he warn us about the danger of rejecting Jesus and tell us not to walk away from Jesus, but he also explains to us that God wants believers to experience the full assurance of hope in the Christian life. Look especially at verse 11. We desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end. Now there's this pastor just coming right out and saying, “I want everybody in this congregation to have a full assurance of hope.” So what he's just said is not meant to undermine the consciences of sinners who've been saved by the grace of God but are still sensitive to their sin.

I was reading a letter by John Newton, written to a friend of his in the year 1801. We sang a song by John Newton this morning, “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken.” Now John Newton, as many of you know, was a slave trader before he was converted and for a little while after he was converted. And if you've read the biography of John Newton, John Newton did some horrible things. When he wrote “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!” he was not being pious and super-spiritual. He meant every letter of that word. If you had tried to change in your hymnal that “saved a one like me” he would have written “wretch” right back in. He meant it. Read the biography of Newton sometime. Things that he did will stun you. Well here's a letter, almost fifty years after his conversion, after he's been in the Gospel ministry for thirty-five plus years, writing to a friend in 1801 — he's going to die in 1807 so it's six years before he dies. And he says this, “There have not been two hours in my waking life since the events of 1754 in Africa that I have not thought of what I did.” Isn't that interesting? John Newton, the author of the hymn, “Amazing Grace,” the great evangelical preacher, in his waking experience, several times a day for the rest of his Christian experience, was mindful of the horrible things that he had done when he was in Africa.

The author of Hebrews isn't writing this so that the John Newtons of this world will be undermined in their assurance. He's writing this so that people who don't believe in Jesus will recognize the danger of not believing in Jesus and will not turn their backs on Jesus but would instead have faith in Jesus. But even for sensitive sinners struggling with sin, he wants them to have assurance as, by God's grace, John Newton had. John Newton did not have assurance of salvation because he was free from reasons for being condemned for sin, but because he trusted in a Savior who was condemned in his place. And he knew that and therefore he could have assurance. And the author of Hebrews is saying here, “I want you to have a full assurance of hope.” He says, “I'm convinced of better things concerning you.” So after this stern warning, he turns quickly and emphatically to a word of encouragement for the congregation. And you look at verse 10 and you see the outward fruits or evidences of their changed hearts. They labor for the Lord, they love one another, they serve one another. And he says, “These are all, to me, evidences of a heart that has been changed, of a heart that trusts in Jesus, and therefore I want you to have a full assurance for your hope.” This whole message, both the warning and the encouragement, my friends, turns on your faith in Jesus.

Do you have faith in Jesus? You know, it's always good to come to passages that push us back to very basic issues in the Christian life. This one is doing that today. Do you have faith in Jesus? Do you know what that means? To believe who He is and what He says and what He has done for you in your place. Do you believe that He is the Son of God and Savior of sinners? Do you believe that His words are the words of life? Do you believe that He died in your place, bearing your sin, so that you might not be condemned for that sin? Do you believe that there is no name under heaven whereby you could be saved except His name? Do you believe that He is the way and the truth and the life and no one comes to the Father except by Him? Do you have faith in Jesus? If you do, there is no condemnation for you in Christ Jesus. There are no worries that you have if you have faith in Jesus. But if you don't, you have every reason to worry, because apart from Him there is no forgiveness of sins. That's what the author of Hebrews is getting at here. He's saying, “Don't stop believing in Jesus! Don't turn your back on Jesus because He's your only hope of salvation.”

Hear that, Christian and non-Christian alike this morning. Christians, don't stop believing in Jesus. The culture around you isn't helping you believe in Jesus. It's toxic to orthodox faith and to Christian trust. It really is. The world is not helping us to continue to believe in Jesus. Keep on believing in Jesus. And non-Christian here this morning, if you will not trust in Him then you will stand before God in your own sins and there will be no one in this universe who will say, when you receive condemnation for your sin, that God has acted unjustly. Everyone in this universe will have to acknowledge, “Yes, that sinner received what he deserved.” But if you trust in Jesus, here's the amazing thing. Just like Billy read to us from Jeremiah 25, Jesus receives what you deserve and you receive what Jesus deserves. That's the line I want to be standing in on the last day. The only way I can stand in that line is to believe in Jesus. Let's pray.

*Heavenly Father, grant the questioning faith today. Clear doubt from their hearts and minds so that they see the Savior clearly and they trust in Him. Lord, break the skepticism of the agnostic. Cause them to see the dire situation in which they exist and will run to Jesus in faith. And for struggling believers, like John Newton, like me, like many others here today, grant us faith in Christ that we may see in Him, our justification. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.*

Now would you take your hymnals in hand and turn with me to number 305. It's important after we've studied a passage like this to be crystal clear about what the basis of our salvation is. And I don't know a better hymn than “Arise, My Soul, Arise!” to do that. Number 305.

Christian, receive from your God all that you need. Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Alex Carmichael – CARM

### Can a person lose their salvation as Hebrews 6:4-6 seems to teach?

<https://carm.org/about-can-person-lose-salvation>

There are many people who have taught (and others still teach today) that this passage clearly shows that a [Christian](https://carm.org/dictionary-christian) can lose his or her [salvation](https://carm.org/dictionary-salvation). And in a cursory reading, it does seem that this interpretation is correct.

But, as it is with many Scriptures, we should be aware of the “[heresy](https://carm.org/dictionary-heresy) of the first glance.”

So let’s take a close look at this passage and see what it is really teaching.

[Hebrews 6:4-6 (NKJV)](http://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Heb%206.4-6):

4 For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit,

5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come,

6 if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.

This passage begs the question, “How can one be ‘enlightened’ and fall away?” It does seem to be speaking of someone losing his salvation.

Or does it?

The key to answering this is discovering who is the “they,” and from what have they “fallen away?"

To begin with, it is important to know that this section of Hebrews is about apostates/heretics--those who may have--to some degree--embraced the truth but have now abandoned it. It’s also important to know how the believers who originally read this message of “those who were once enlightened” would understand it. Today, we might think it means that they were enlightened about the truth or that they were regenerated. But what was the intent of the original author, and how would his readers have understood it?

“Enlightened” doesn’t always mean “regenerated” or “saved” in the Scriptures.

In this verse, it is speaking of people who were involved, perhaps heavily involved, in a church. It is likely they would have joined a congregation, heard the Gospel, and saw the Spirit working in the life of believers. They may have received some of the blessings of being part of a covenant community, and they may have even publicly confessed Christ and have been baptized (in early Christian writings, conversion and baptism were sometimes termed “enlightenment"). But they never had a saving knowledge of Christ.

Another key word in understanding who is being described here is the word, “tasted.” They only “tasted” or “sampled” Christ. They were never truly converted to faith in Him.

A good analogy would be the difference between marrying someone and just going out on a few dates with them. A person can learn things about Christ, and thereby come to admire Him, and they may enjoy being part of a fellowship but have no real lasting commitment to Him. This is not the same thing as the repentance and faith by which a person is savingly joined to Christ.

This is seen in the not uncommon situation people who have been in a church for many years, been involved in many things, never missed a service, yet are not saved. They’ve been “enlightened” by seeing God at work but only just “tasted” what was going on--never really being a part of it. They most likely would have even partaken of the Lord’s Supper as the wording in the passage suggests. But they were never really saved. To sort of paraphrase Scripture, they were “in the church but not of the Church.”

So to be a member of a church and be “enlightened” by the life of the Church and seeing God at work doesn’t guarantee salvation. Neither does being baptized, for that matter. “Enlightened” does not necessarily mean “saved.”

[Ephesians 1:15-21(NKJV)](http://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Eph%201.15-21) uses “enlightenment” differently but still does not mean “saved”:

15 Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints,

16 do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers:

17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him,

18 the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints,

19 and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power

20 which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places,

21 far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come.

The passage is referring to a Christian (the person is already identified as such in v15), but it is a prayer that God would grant them wisdom (v16-17), and once they are given that wisdom, they would then be in a state of “being enlightened” (v18) regarding their calling. So, again, the term, “enlightened,” is not necessarily synonymous with being saved.

In both of these cases, the Greek word for “enlightenment,” *photizo*, refers to doctrinal knowledge. While we need doctrine for salvation (we can’t have faith in just anything, can we?), we aren’t saved by a doctrinal understanding.

And regarding the word, “partake,” *metakhos*, [Hebrews 3:14 (NKJV)](http://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Heb%203.14) sheds further light on the matter: “For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end.” It’s not by a believer’s holding fast that they make themselves a partaker, but if they have truly partaken of Christ, they will indeed hold fast. One has to be a believer in order to hold fast, to not fall away.

Now the question is, “If the ‘they’ is someone who has ‘tasted’ of the Church, has seen what has been going on and seen God at work, has been ‘in the church but not of the Church,’ what exactly have they ‘fallen away’ from that they can’t be 'renew[ed] again to repentance’? And doesn’t that imply that they were originally brought to repentance?

John Calvin addresses this problem of “falling away” in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He writes that  “experience shows that the reprobate are sometimes affected in a way so similar to the Elect.” In fact, they can “truly feel the efficacy of the Gospel,” and there is no reason why the Lord could not allow the reprobate “some taste of His grace" or “irradiate their minds with some sparks of His light.” However, this is only what is called a “temporary faith.” Calvin writes further, “Not that they truly perceive the power of spiritual grace and the sure light of faith; but the Lord--the better to convict them, and leave them without excuse--instills into their minds such a sense of His goodness as can be felt without the Spirit of adoption.” Calvin states that the unsaved person in this situation lays hold to the “shadow” instead of the “substance.”

Louis Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology* also covers “temporary faith” as being distinguished from “true saving faith.” Berkhof writes that temporary faith is most likely “grounded in the emotional life and seeks personal enjoyment rather than the glory of God.” That’s why it is not difficult to understand why this kind of false faith is quickly lost when God or the church ceases to be fun when it loses its appeal.

Unlike saving faith, temporary faith, Berkhof writes, “is not rooted in a regenerate heart.” He locates temporary faith in God’s Word in [Matthew 13:18-23 (NKJV)](http://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Matt%2013.18-23):

The Parable of the Sower Explained

[Matthew 13:18-23 (NKJV)](http://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Matt%2013.18-23)

18 “Therefore hear the parable of the sower:

19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside.

20 But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;

21 yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.

22 Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful.

23 But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”

They were given just enough repentance in that they became members of the Visible Church, which is comprised of both wheat and chaff. Not everyone who sits next to you in a pew has been brought to repentance and faith.

That’s what they have “fallen away” from--the Visible Church, not salvation. Salvation is final as repentance is a gift of the Lord. Once you have been adopted into God’s family, you are not let go. In [John 10:27-28 (NKJV)](http://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/John%2010.27-28), Jesus states: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.” Once we are saved, we have an eternal security that is final.

There is also a kind of falling away that is final, too. We have to keep in mind that this is not just a simple falling away where they just don’t go to church anymore but one in which a person fully renounces Christ. Once they fall away and put the things of Christ completely behind them, they simply won’t ever be gifted with any degree of repentance again. Anyone who makes such a decision was never a member of the Invisible Church.

This does not mean that those who stray for a season cannot be restored. Those who have not completely fallen away, who have not held the Son of God up to contempt, can indeed be restored to repentance. A sinner who has genuine sorrow over sin shows that the Holy Spirit is working in his heart and is not forever lost. But those who have indeed fallen away completely are impossible to restore, and God will not permit those who have committed such apostasy to come to repentance.

As for “crucify again the Son of God” and putting Him to an open shame, this is similar to the warning given in [Hebrews 10:26-29 (NKJV)](http://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Heb%2010.26-29):

26 For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,

27 but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.

28 Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.

29 Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?

If someone leaves the Church because they don’t feel that Jesus is the Christ or that He is the only Way, it is as if they “trample the Son of God underfoot” and count Christ’s sacrifice a “common thing.” What those who fall away have done after having received the knowledge of the truth (being “enlightened”) and have gone beyond the point of repentance by rejecting God’s Son is they have joined the ranks of those who rejected Him and sentenced Him to death, in effect, “they crucify again for themselves the Son of God.” They would, if they were there, have joined the crowd who chanted, “Give us Barabbas!” “Give me something else!” is what the person is saying in abandoning Christ.

Even the leaders in Jesus’ day knew He was from God but declared Him otherwise when they strived to put Him on the Cross. Those who fall away after experiencing the truth of Christ join the religious leaders of Christ’s day in their crucifying again for themselves the Son of God.

Yet, as [Hebrews 10:29](http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Heb%2010.29) says, the punishment will be much worse for those who abandon their confession.

In rejecting Christ and thinking that there must be another way other than this narrow path, such as thinking that there are many roads to Heaven or that God gives people another chance after death or that everyone will eventually be saved, this puts Christ “to an open shame” because it makes Him out to be a liar, and it makes a mockery of His dying once for all time for the full payment of sin. If Christ being the only Way is insufficient, if it isn’t right in a person’s eyes, this “shames” the Lord by saying--in effect--that God didn’t get it right if this is the way it is--that there must be another way. The person is saying that God has to try doing it a different way in order to get it right. It is a denial of Christ’s atonement being sufficient and that there must be more or different or better ways than this.

Yet Christ will not be crucified again--there is no need, no matter what the apostate may say. Christ died once for all time, for those who would believe in Him. He is the only Way into Heaven, and outside of Him there is no hope as there is nothing or no one else where one can find forgiveness of sin. If one chooses to abandon Christ after tasting of His goodness, they will not find salvation anywhere else, no matter where or how hard they look.

But for those who are truly His, there is nothing to fear. And that is because, as always, the focus isn’t on us but on God. The final point of TULIP ( <http://carm.org/calvinism> ), “Perseverance of the Saints,” would perhaps best be viewed as “Preservation of the Saints” as it is God who holds us and preserves us to the end, not ourselves ([John 10:27-28](http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/John%2010.27-28): My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand). Christ is not only the author but also the finisher of our faith ([Hebrews 12:2](http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Heb%2012.2) looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God).

We cannot lose our salvation as from beginning to end it is all undergirded by God.

## Wayne Grudem

### Systematic chapter 40

Finally, there are two passages in Hebrews that also affirm that those who finally fall away may give many external signs of conversion and may look in many ways like Christians. The first of these, Hebrews 6:4–6, has frequently been used by Arminians as proof that believers can lose their salvation. But on closer inspection such an interpretation is not convincing. The author writes,

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt. (Heb. 6:4–6)

The author continues with an example from agriculture:

For land which has drunk the rain that often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned. (Heb. 6:7–8)

In this agricultural metaphor, those who receive final judgment are compared to land that bears no vegetation or useful fruit, but rather bears thorns and thistles. When we recall the other metaphors in Scripture where good fruit is a sign of true spiritual life and fruitlessness is a sign of false believers (for example, Matt. 3:8–10; 7:15–20; 12:33–35), we already have an indication that the author is **speaking of people whose most trustworthy evidence of their spiritual condition** **(the fruit they bear) is negative**, suggesting that the author is talking about people who are not genuinely Christians.

Some have objected that the long description of things that have happened to these people who fall away means that they must have been genuinely born again. But that is not a convincing objection when we look at the individual terms used. The author says they have “once been enlightened” (Heb. 6:4). But this enlightening simply means that they came to **understand the truths of the gospel**, not that they responded to those truths with genuine saving faith.12

Similarly, the word once that is used to speak of those who “have once been enlightened” is the Greek term hapax, which is used, for example, in Philippians 4:16 of the Philippians’ sending Paul a gift “once and again,” and in Hebrews 9:7 of entrance in the Holy of Holies “once a year.” Therefore, this word **does not mean that something happened “once” and can never be repeated**, but simply that it happened once, without specifying whether it will be repeated or not.13

The text further says that these people “have tasted the heavenly gift” and that they “have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come” (Heb. 6:4–5). Inherent in the idea of tasting is the fact that the **tasting is temporary and one might or might not decide to accept the thing that is tasted.** For example, the same Greek word (geuomai) is used in Matthew 27:34 to say that those crucifying Jesus “offered him wine to drink, mingled with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.” The word is also used in a figurative sense meaning “**come to know something**.”14 If we understand it in this figurative sense, as it must be understood here since the passage is not talking about tasting literal food, then it means that these people have come to understand the heavenly gift (which probably means here that they had experienced some of the power of the Holy Spirit at work) and to know something of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come. It does not necessarily mean that they had (or did not have) genuine saving faith, but may simply mean that they came to understand it and have some experience of spiritual power.15

The text also further says that these people “have become partakers of the Holy Spirit” (Heb. 6:4). The question here is the exact meaning of the word metochos, which is here translated “partaker.” It is not always clear to English-speaking readers that this term has a range of meaning and may imply very close participation and attachment, or may only imply a loose association with the other person or persons named. For example, the context shows that in **Hebrews 3:14 to become a “partaker” of Christ means to have a very close participation with him in a saving relationship**.16 On the other hand, metochos can also be used in a much looser sense, simply to refer to **associates or companions.** We read that when the disciples took in a great catch of fish so that their nets were breaking, “they beckoned to their partners in the other boat to come and help them” (Luke 5:7). Here it simply refers to those who were companions or partners with Peter and the other disciples in their fishing work.17 Ephesians 5:7 uses a closely related word (symmetochos, a compound of metochos and the preposition syn [”with”]) when Paul warns Christians about the sinful acts of unbelievers and says, “do not associate with them” (Eph. 5:7). He is not concerned that their total nature will be transformed by the unbelievers, but simply that they will associate with them and have their own witness compromised and their own lives influenced to some degree by them.

By analogy, Hebrews 6:4–6 speaks of people who have been “associated with” the Holy Spirit, and thereby had their lives influenced by him, but it need not imply that they had a redeeming work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, or that they were regenerated. By similar analogy with the example of the fishing companions in Luke 5:7, Peter and the disciples could be associated with them and even to some degree influenced by them without having a thoroughgoing change of life caused by that association. The very word metochos allows for a range of influence from fairly weak to fairly strong, for it only means “one who participates with or shares with or accompanies in some activity.” This was apparently what had happened to these people spoken of in Hebrews 6, who had been associated with the church and as such associated with the work of the Holy Spirit, and no doubt had been influenced by him in some ways in their lives.18

Finally, the text says that it is impossible “to restore again to repentance” people who have experienced these things and have then committed apostasy. Some have argued that if this is a repentance to which they need to be restored again, then it must be genuine repentance. But this is not necessarily the case. First, we must realize that “repentance” (Gk. metanoia) does not need to refer to inward heart repentance unto salvation. For example, Hebrews 12:17 uses this word to speak of a change of mind that Esau sought concerning the sale of his birthright, and refers to it as “repentance” (metanoia). This would not have been a repentance for salvation, but simply a change of mind and an undoing of the transaction regarding his birthright. (Note also the example of Judas’ repentance in Matt. 27:3—howbeit with a different Greek word.)

The cognate verb “to repent” (Gk. metanoeō) is sometimes used to refer not to saving repentance, but just to sorrow for individual offenses in Luke 17:3–4: “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” We conclude that “repentance” simply means a sorrow for actions that have been done or for sins that have been committed. Whether or not it is a genuine saving repentance, a “repentance unto salvation,” may not be always evident right away. The author of Hebrews is not concerned to specify whether it is a genuine repentance or not. He is simply saying that if someone has a sorrow for sin and comes to understand the gospel and experiences these various blessings of the Holy Spirit’s work (no doubt in fellowship with the church), and then turns away, it will not be possible to restore such a person again to a place of sorrow for sin. But this does not necessarily imply that the repentance was genuine saving repentance in the first place.

At this point we may ask what kind of person is described by all of these terms. These are no doubt people who have been affiliated closely with the fellowship of the church. They have had some sorrow for sin (repentance). They have clearly understood the gospel (they have been enlightened). They have come to appreciate the attractiveness of the Christian life and the change that comes about in people’s lives because of becoming a Christian, and they have probably had answers to prayer in their own lives and felt the power of the Holy Spirit at work, perhaps even using some spiritual gifts in the manner of the unbelievers in Matthew 7:22 (they have become “associated with” the work of the Holy Spirit or have become “partakers” of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the heavenly gift and the powers of the age of come). They have been exposed to the true preaching of the Word and have appreciated much of its teachings (they have tasted the goodness of the Word of God).

But then in spite of all this, if they “commit apostasy” and “crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt” (Heb. 6:6), then they are willfully rejecting all of these blessings and turning decidedly against them. Perhaps all of us have known in our own churches people who (sometimes by their own profession) have long been affiliated with the fellowship of the church but are not themselves born-again Christians. They have thought about the gospel for years and have continued to resist the wooing of the Holy Spirit in their lives, perhaps through an unwillingness to give up lordship of their lives to Jesus and preferring to cling to it themselves.

Now the author tells us that if these people willfully turn away from all of these temporary blessings, then it will be impossible to restore them again to any kind of repentance or sorrow for sin. Their hearts will be hardened and their consciences calloused. What more could be done to bring them to salvation? If we tell them Scripture is true they will say that they know it but they have decided to reject it. If we tell them God answers prayer and changes lives they will respond that they know that as well, but they want nothing of it. If we tell them that the Holy Spirit is powerful to work in people’s lives and the gift of eternal life is good beyond description, they will say that they understand that, but they want nothing of it. Their repeated familiarity with the things of God and their experience of many influences of the Holy Spirit has simply served to harden them against conversion.

Now the author of Hebrews knows that there are some in the community to which he writes who are in danger of falling away in just this way (see Heb. 2:3; 3:8, 12, 14–15; 4:1, 7, 11; 10:26, 29, 35–36, 38–39; 12:3, 15–17). He wants to warn them that, though they have participated in the fellowship of the church and experienced a number of God’s blessings in their lives, yet if they fall away after all that, there is no salvation for them. This does not imply that he thinks that true Christians could fall away—Hebrews 3:14 implies quite the opposite. But he wants them to gain assurance of salvation through their continuing in faith, and thereby implies that if they fall away it would show that they never were Christ’s people in the first place (see Heb. 3:6: “We are his house if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope”).

Therefore the author wants to give a severe warning to those in danger of slipping away from their Christian profession. He wants to use the strongest language possible to say, “Here is how far a person can come in experiencing temporary blessings and still not really be saved.” He is warning them to watch out, because depending on temporary blessings and experiences is not enough. To do this he talks not of any true change of heart or any good fruit produced, but simply about the temporary blessings and experiences that have come to these persons and have given them some understanding of Christianity.

For this reason he immediately passes from this description of those who commit apostasy to a further analogy that shows that these people who fell away **never had any genuine fruit in their lives.** As we explained above, verses 7–8 speak of these people in terms of “thorns and thistles,” the kind of crop that is brought forth on land that has no worthwhile life in itself even though it receives repeated blessings from God (in terms of the analogy, even though rain frequently falls upon it). We should notice here that people who commit apostasy are not compared to a field that once bore good fruit and now does not, but that they are like land that never bore good fruit, but only thorns and thistles. The land may look good before the crops start to come up, but the fruit gives the genuine evidence, and it is bad.

Strong support for this interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–8 is found in the verse immediately following. Though the author has been speaking very harshly about the possibility of falling away, he then returns to speak to the situation of the great majority of the hearers, whom he thinks to be genuine Christians. He says, “Though we speak thus, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things that belong to salvation” (Heb. 6:9). But the question is “better things” than what? The plural **“better things” forms an appropriate contrast to the “good things” that have been mentioned in verses 4–6:** the author is convinced that **most of his readers have experienced better things than simply the partial and temporary influences of the Holy Spirit and the church talked about in verses 4–6.**

In fact, the author talks about these things by saying (literally) that they are “better things, also belonging to salvation” (Gk. kai echomena sōtērias).19 These are not only the temporary blessings talked about in verses 4–6, but these are better things, things having not only temporary influence, but “also belonging to salvation.” In this way the Greek word kai (“also”) shows that salvation is something that was not part of the things mentioned in verses 4–6 above. Therefore this word kai, which is not explicitly translated in the RSV or NIV (but the NASB comes close),20 provides a crucial key for understanding the passage. If the author had meant to say that the people mentioned in verses 4–6 were truly saved, then it is very difficult to understand why he would say in verse 9 that he is convinced of better things for them, things that belong to salvation, or that have salvation in addition to those things mentioned above. He thus shows that he can use a brief phrase to say that people “have salvation” if he wishes to do so (he does not need to pile up many phrases), and he shows, moreover, that the people whom he speaks of in verses 4–6 are not saved.21

What exactly are these “better things”? In addition to salvation mentioned in verse 9, they are things that give real evidence of salvation—genuine fruit in their lives (v. 10), full assurance of hope (v. 11), and saving faith, of the type exhibited by those who inherit the promises (v. 12). In this way he reassures those who are genuine believers—those who show fruit in their lives and show love for other Christians, who show hope and genuine faith that is continuing at the present time, and who are not about to fall away. He wants to reassure these readers (who are certainly the great majority of the ones to whom he writes) while still issuing a strong warning to those among them who may be in danger of falling away.

## John Frame

### 44. Perseverance and Assurance

It can be difficult to tell whether a professing believer is true or false. Listen to Hebrews 6:4–8:

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

This writer is speaking about false believers. But he describes them much as one might describe a true believer: repentant, enlightened, tasting the heavenly gift (possibly some supernatural gift—tongues, prophecy, healing), sharing the Spirit, tasting the goodness of the Word and the powers of the age to come (again, probably referring to miraculous events). So there are some Christians who believe that this passage describes true believers, and that these true believers do not persevere, but fall away. That position, in my view, however, contradicts that great number of Bible texts we discussed earlier.

Can we regard the people in this passage as false believers? I think we can. Think of Judas Iscariot, chosen by Jesus to be one of the twelve disciples. By joining Jesus’ band of followers, he turned away from the sinful world, a kind of repentance. Doubtless he received the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, either from Jesus or from John. He was enlightened by hearing Jesus’ teaching. He tasted the heavenly gift [Dr. Frame understands this to refer to supernatural gifts] as he watched Jesus heal and prophesy.1267 He shared the Spirit, at least as much as King Saul did when he prophesied, and people asked, “Is Saul also among the prophets?” (1 Sam. 10:11). Judas also tasted the good word of Christ and Jesus’ miraculous powers, the powers of the age to come, the powers of the coming kingdom. Judas himself preached Christ and worked miracles in his name (Matt. 10:1–42). But he proved to be reprobate, unbelieving. He betrayed Jesus, who said of him that it would have been better if he had not been born. Externally, he seemed to be a believer, and indeed, he had many advantages that believers have, hearing Jesus’ words and watching his miracles.

Perhaps even more to the focus of the letter to the Hebrews: OT Israel was much like this—enlightened in comparison with the other nations, experiencing all sorts of heavenly gifts, powers, and words. But many of the Israelites were wicked and turned against God.

Hebrews 10:26–31 also speaks of apostasy. Here, the writer says that the apostate “has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace.” The most difficult point here is the clause that says the apostates were once sanctified by the blood of Christ. How can that be said of someone who falls short of final salvation?

Well, the language of sanctification means a setting apart. It can refer to moral cleansing, as we saw in the doctrine of sanctification in the previous chapter. But it can also refer to other kinds of setting apart. God said that Israel was his holy people because he had set it apart from all the nations of the world; yet Israel was not always sanctified in the sense of being obedient to God. In 1 Corinthians 7:14, Paul says that children of believers are holy, even though they may not be old enough to perform good works. I believe that those in Hebrews 10 are people who became part of God’s holy people, separated from all others. As Israel was set apart by sacrifices, those in Hebrews 10 were set apart by the blood of Christ, which separates the visible church from everyone else in the world. But God did not change their hearts, and they came to despise the blood of Christ, as Judas Iscariot certainly did.1268

So people can have all these blessings without being saved, and so without the ability to persevere. The apostates of Hebrews 6 did not have regenerate hearts or true faith. So in Hebrews 6:9, the writer says, “Yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.” The writer believes that his readers have regenerate hearts and true faith, and so they are saved and will be saved in the end. He knows that the apostates he has spoken of do not have gifts of God sufficient for salvation.

In our own time, this passage applies to many who make a minimal commitment to Christ. How many nominal church members there are in our time! How many have “come forward” at an evangelistic meeting, or even receive baptism and join a church, only to lose interest shortly afterward. And there are some today like Judas, or like the Pharisees, who even get very active in the Lord’s work, who may become pillars of the church over a period of years, whose hearts are not right with God, who have never experienced the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit.

Some people have taught that anyone who makes a minimal commitment to Christianity—for example, by coming forward, professing faith, being baptized—will certainly be saved in the end, even if the person then renounces Christ and lives a sinful life. That, of course, is not biblical teaching. In Scripture, those who persevere are those who are regenerate by God’s Spirit and who grow in grace. We cannot read the hearts of people, so we sometimes fail to discern that growth, or the lack of it. But God sees, and in the end it’s God who will judge.

The view that those who make a minimal commitment will certainly be saved is sometimes called eternal security, though not everyone who uses this phrase teaches this error. Perseverance is not guaranteed to everyone who professes faith, only to those who really trust Christ. Indeed, some who make initial professions of faith get involved in such serious sins that they should be cast out of the church, excommunicated (1 Cor. 5). Excommunication means that someone whom the church originally considered to be a believer will no longer be considered as such.

But this teaching is not intended to frighten believers into morbid self-examination. Christians sometimes experience periods of doubt over whether they have “truly believed.” But Hebrews 6 and 10 are not about immature believers who are trying to serve Christ but who struggle with sins in their lives. The apostates of Hebrews 6 and 10 were wolves in sheep’s clothing. Their profession was playacting. You remember how the disciples trusted Judas with the treasury, and he used it for his personal wants. He put on a show of caring for the poor, when all he cared about was himself. The Hebrews 6 apostates never confessed their sins and trusted Jesus for forgiveness. To those who are not playacting, but have faith, even as a grain of mustard seed, God promises to preserve them to the very end, and into all eternity. If you are concerned about your faithfulness and devotion to Christ, your concern is a mark of true faith. Wolves in sheep’s clothing are not concerned about such things.

## Steven J. Cole

### When Repentance Becomes Impossible (Hebrews 6:4-8)

<https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-17-when-repentance-becomes-impossible-hebrews-64-8>

We come to what is arguably the most difficult passage in the New Testament to interpret. The problem is that no view, including the one that I hold, is without problems. So you have to decide which set of problems you want to live with. If you wish to advocate a view that is different than mine, I wish you well! I consulted over 35 different commentaries or sermons, and in my judgment, no one is able to answer *all* of the difficulties that confront us in this text. So we cannot be dogmatic here, but must continue to ask God for understanding in a spirit of submission and obedience to what we do understand.

While there are dozens of views on the various details of the text, there are basically four major views when it comes to the overall interpretation. Two of these views, in my opinion, may be dismissed without much discussion, since they contradict many other Scriptures. The other two views have merit, depending on which problems you wish to live with. I will explain why the view that I hold to makes the most sense to me.

**The Four Major Views:**

1. THE ARMINIAN VIEW: TRUE BELIEVERS LOSE THEIR SALVATION IF THEY FALL AWAY FROM CHRIST.

Consistent Arminians deny the eternal security of the believer and the perseverance of the saints. These are not completely synonymous doctrines. The doctrine of eternal security teaches “once saved, always saved.” If a person believes in Jesus Christ as Savior, he receives eternal life at that instant and he cannot lose it. The Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints agrees that if a person is *truly* saved, God will keep him saved unto eternity, because salvation is from the Lord, not from men.

But Reformed theologians draw a distinction between a person’s *decision* to receive Christ and God actually saving a soul. People can make decisions apart from God’s regenerating power that is necessary to bring a soul from spiritual death to spiritual life. When a person makes a decision to trust Christ, the question is, *did God supernaturally raise that person from death to life?* Did God give him a new heart? The Reformed view is that time will tell. As the parable of the sower shows, the stony ground seed and the seed among the thorns looked good for a while, but did not bear fruit to eternal life (Matt. 13:20-23). In other words, the Reformed view is that there is such a thing as false faith. The false believer seems to be saved for a while, but later reveals his true condition and falls away.

Consistent Arminians, however, teach that salvation depends on man’s will to believe in Christ. Since man does it, man can undo it. Serious sin (Arminians are hard pressed to determine *which* or *how much* sin) results in a loss of salvation. They say that Hebrews 6describes a believer who loses his salvation.

But they have two big problems. First, many biblical texts teach that true believers cannot be lost (John 6:39-40; 10:27-30; Rom. 8:28-39). Second, if true believers can be lost, then our text teaches that it is impossible for them to regain their salvation. Most Arminians do not want to go there!

2. NON-LORDSHIP SALVATION VIEW: GENUINE CHRISTIANS CAN DENY THE FAITH AND YET REMAIN SAVED, ALTHOUGH THEY LOSE THEIR REWARDS IN HEAVEN.

Zane Hodges (*Bible Knowledge Commentary, Hebrews* [Victor Books]) and the Grace Evangelical Society are the main advocates, along with R. T. Kendall. They hold to a decisional view of salvation and they reduce saving faith to a notional (“mental”) assent that does not include repentance. Once a person believes in Christ, he is eternally secure no matter what his subsequent life is like. He may later become an atheist or he may live in gross sin for the rest of his life. But because he once “believed,” he is eternally secure.

The problems with this view are too numerous to deal with in this message. The biblical books of James and 1 John, and John MacArthur’s *Faith Works* [Word] refute this view. The Bible is clear that a true believer may sin grievously (David & Peter are examples) and yet be restored. But it is also clear that some profess to believe and yet are not truly saved (Balaam, Judas, Simon Magus, 1 Cor. 15:2; 2 Cor. 6:1; 13:5; Titus 1:16). “By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:3-4). A person who falls away and crucifies again the Son of God, putting Him to open shame, who cannot be renewed to repentance, is not a believer who loses his rewards!

3. THE HYPOTHETICAL VIEW: THE AUTHOR IS SPEAKING OF SOMETHING THAT CANNOT HAPPEN, BUT IS USING IT AS A WARNING TO PRESS ON.

The impossibility is variously interpreted as either apostasy or getting saved again. Dr. Ryrie explains (and seemingly advocates) this view in the footnote in *The Ryrie Study Bible* [Moody Press]:

To “fall away” is impossible (since, according to this view, true believers are eternally secure), but the phrase is placed in the sentence to strengthen the warning. It is similar to saying something like this to a class of students: “It is impossible for a student, once enrolled in this course, if he turns the clock back [which cannot be done], to start the course over. Therefore, let all students go on to deeper knowledge.”

This view has the advantage of understanding the phrases in 6:4-5 to refer to genuine conversion, which they certainly seem to be describing. Charles Spurgeon advocated a version of the hypothetical view (*The New Park Street Pulpit* [Baker], 2:169-176, “Final Perseverance,” although different than Ryrie’s view), because he could not accept that the phrases in 6:4-5 describe false believers. He explained that true believers *cannot* fall away because God keeps them from doing so. But Paul (whom he thinks wrote Hebrews) is arguing that the reason they cannot fall away is because it would negate the efficacy of Christ’s atonement on the cross. Thus restoration would be impossible. Others argue that the hypothetical warning is not against falling away from the faith, but against going back and starting the Christian life all over again (“relaying the foundation,” 6:1-2, which is impossible).

I reject this view because of two problems. First, it is an utterly confusing way to make the point. Every time I hear the view explained, I think, “Huh? Why would the author explain something in such a convoluted way?”

Second, a hypothetical warning is no warning at all. If it is impossible to do something, you don’t need to warn me not to do it. Spurgeon tries to counter this objection by saying that God uses the warning (“you can never be restored”) to prevent Christians from falling away. He uses the illustration of a deep precipice. God tells His children, “If you fall over this precipice, you’ll be dashed to pieces.” This leads the believer to cry out, “Father, hang onto me so that I don’t fall over!” The warning keeps the believer in holy fear and dependence on God, because he knows that if he were to fall over the edge, there could be no restoration (p. 175).

But his analogy is valid only if the possibility of falling actually exists. If there were an impossibly high fence around the precipice, and no one could ever climb over it, even if he tried, then what need is there to warn someone not to fall over the edge? A hypothetical warning is not really a warning at all. The same thing applies if the warning is against going back and getting saved all over again (which is impossible). Why warn against something that you cannot do? Besides, this variation ignores the serious implications of the term “fall away.” Something more serious than trying to start over in the Christian life is at stake.

4. THE FALSE BELIEVER VIEW: THE AUTHOR IS SPEAKING OF THOSE WHO ARE ASSOCIATED WITH THE CHURCH AND ITS BLESSINGS, BUT ARE NOT TRULY SAVED.

This view, which I hold to (in spite of the problems), says that the people described in 6:4-5 are in the Hebrew church and appear to be saved. But at some point, usually a crisis, their true colors come through. They repudiate their faith in Christ, go back either to Judaism or to the world, and side with those who crucified the Son of God. In so doing, they put Christ to open shame. In effect, their lives, if not their words, say to people, “I tried faith in Christ, but it didn’t work! It was a sham! I was on the inside, so I know what I am talking about. The Christian faith is worthless!” For such apostates, the author says, “it is impossible to renew them again to repentance.” They have hardened their hearts against the truth that they were exposed to. Although they looked for a while as if they were saved, their lives now show that they never were saved.

There are two major problems with this view. First, the terms in 6:4-5 sound as if they are describing true believers, not false believers. Why would the author pile up all of these terms if he is describing false believers? Second, if they were not truly saved, then what is there to fall away from? How can they be *renewed* to repentance if they never truly repented in the first place? I admit that these are difficult problems. That’s why I said at the first that no view is problem-free. You have to pick the problems you can live with. Some principles for interpreting these verses that I will now explain help to mitigate these two objections.

**How do we decide which view is correct?**

There are two main factors:

1. WHICH VIEW BEST FITS WITH THE ARGUMENT, CONTEXT, AND SITUATION THAT THE BOOK OF HEBREWS ADDRESSES?

As we’ve seen, the Book of Hebrews was written to a group of Jewish believers in Christ who were tempted under the threat of persecution to return to Judaism. The author is arguing for the superiority of the person and work of Jesus Christ. To abandon Christ for the old Jewish system is to turn from God’s supreme and final provision in His Son to that which is inferior.

In chapters 3 & 4, the author used the negative example of Israel in the wilderness (fromPsalm 95) to warn these Hebrew Christians not to fall away because of an evil, unbelieving heart (3:7-12, 15; 4:3, 5, 7). He urges them not to fail to enter God’s rest through disobedience and unbelief (3:18; 4:6, 11). He tells them, “We have become partakers of Christ, *if* we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end” (3:14).

As I pointed out in our study of those chapters, the entire nation had put the blood on their doorposts, which is analogous to saving faith. They all passed through the Red Sea, which is a type of baptism (1 Cor. 10:2). They all ate the same spiritual food and drank water from the rock, which was a type of Christ. They all lived under the illumination and protection of the cloud and the pillar of fire. **They all enjoyed these many spiritual benefits, and yet most of them were not genuinely saved.** In his wrath, God laid them low in the wilderness and they did not enter His rest. **They had the gospel preached to them (4:2, 6), but it did not profit them because of their unbelief and disobedience.**

There are many parallels between Israel’s experience in the wilderness and the terms that the author uses in 6:4-5. They had been “enlightened,” in the sense of being exposed to God’s ways and to the gospel. They had “tasted the heavenly gift,” spiritually in the deliverance from Egypt, and physically in the manna that God provided. Probably in 6:4 **“heavenly gift” refers to salvation, or to Christ Himself.**

To be “partakers of the Holy Spirit” means to be sharers in the Spirit, probably with reference to the blessings of salvation and the gifts of the Spirit that were manifested in the Hebrew church. Israel in the exodus corporately experienced the miraculous signs of the plagues and the other miracles connected with that momentous time. **To taste the “good word of God” refers to His good promises to His people, especially in the gospel.** Again, this was a *corporate* experience of Israel in the wilderness. All of them had tasted God’s good word of promise by coming out of slavery in Egypt. But not all were saved through *personal* faith.

They also had tasted “the powers of the age to come.” Israel experienced many miracles, both in the deliverance from Egypt and in God’s sustaining them in the wilderness. In the Hebrew church, it refers to the miraculous sign gifts that God gave to confirm the gospel (2:4). But it’s possible even to perform miracles and yet be lost. Jesus predicted that many on judgment day will say to Him that they had cast out demons and performed miracles in His name, and yet He would say, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matt. 7:22-23).

The analogy that the author uses in 6:7-8 to explain 6:4-6 is a major key to interpreting this text. He talks about ground that drinks in the rain (symbolic of God’s blessings). If it bears a crop, it fulfills its purpose and is blessed by God. But if it yields thorns and thistles, “it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.” This fits with the story of Israel in the wilderness and the point of his warning in 6:4-6. God poured out His blessings on the nation in the exodus and during their wilderness experience. Their lives should have brought forth the fruit of faith and obedience. Instead, they were faithless and disobedient, threatening on several occasions to return to Egypt.

Some in the Hebrew church were in danger of precisely the same sin. **They had participated in a corporate sense in God’s abundant blessings of salvation,** but now they were tempted to return to Judaism. But to do that would be to fall away from Christ, and even worse, to join those who had crucified Him! In so doing, they would be crucifying Christ all over again, and putting Him to open shame by agreeing with the unbelieving Jews that He is not their Savior and Messiah. To do that would put them close to being cursed, and if they died in this state of renouncing their faith, they would face the fires of eternal judgment.

Verse 9 reinforces this interpretation, when the author says, “We are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation….” The word “and” is epexegetical, or explanatory. It may be translated, “that is.” **“Better things” most likely refers back to the five things mentioned in 6:4-5** (Wayne Grudem, in *Still Sovereign*, ed. by Thomas Schriener & Bruce Ware [Baker], pp. 158-159; Grudem’s 50-page treatment of the Hebrews warning passages is the most comprehensive defense of the false believer view that I read). The implication of 6:9 is that the terms in 6:4-5 refer to those who do not possess genuine salvation.

The question remains, “But if they did not possess genuine salvation, why does the author say that it is impossible for them to be *renewed* to repentance? If they had never repented in the first place, why talk about renewal?” Here we turn to the second factor:

2. WHICH VIEW BEST FITS WITH OTHER BIBLICAL TEXTS AND EXAMPLES?

There are many other biblical texts that talk about insincere repentance. **Balaam seemingly repented when the angel confronted him,** but it was not a repentance unto salvation (Num. 22:34; 31:16; compare 2 Pet. 2:15; Jude 11). **Judas felt remorse for betraying Jesus and even returned the silver,** but his “repentance” was not unto salvation (Matt. 27:3-5). Peter condemned the apostates who, “after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them” (2 Pet. 2:20-21).

Thus I believe that both the broad and immediate context of Hebrews, plus other biblical texts and examples about apostasy, support the view that the author is talking here about **false believers who were associated with God’s people and the blessings of salvation, but who were not truly saved.** To *fall away* means deliberately to reject and repudiate the substantial light that they have been given about Christ and the gospel. In so doing, repentance becomes impossible—not for God (Matt. 19:23-26), but rather, it is *morally* impossible because by this deliberate rejection of the truth, they harden their hearts and place themselves beyond repentance. Thus we can sum up the main idea of our text:

***Repentance becomes impossible when a person has been fully exposed to the blessings of God’s people, but falls away through deliberate unbelief and denial of Christ.***

In spite of the difficulties, I believe that this interpretation best fits with the tenor of the warning, the context, and the other biblical warnings and examples of apostasy. Now, some brief…

**Applications:**

1. IT IS DANGEROUS TO TRAFFIC IN CHRISTIAN MATTERS, BUT TO REJECT OR DISOBEY THE LIGHT THAT GOD HAS GRACIOUSLY GIVEN TO US.

One reason that the author piles up these many terms that sound as if these apostates were converted is to warn us about how far we can go in matters of the faith and yet not be genuinely converted. I remember when I first read Jonathan Edwards’ *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* [Banner of Truth], although I had been a pastor for many years, it caused me to examine my own heart to make sure that I was saved! It also opened my eyes to the fact that many in evangelical churches “profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him” (Titus 1:16).

2. IT IS DANGEROUS TO PROFESS FAITH IN CHRIST BUT TO HAVE NO EVIDENCE OF FRUIT IN YOUR LIFE.

God is raining His blessings all around, but each of us needs to ask, “Am I bringing forth thorns and thistles, or fruit unto God?” Read through the lists of the deeds of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:19-23) and ask, “Which most characterizes my life? Am I progressively denying the deeds of the flesh and growing the fruit of the Spirit?”

3. IT IS DANGEROUS NOT TO PRACTICE FREQUENT REPENTANCE.

Repentance isn’t a one-time thing that you do at conversion and then move on. Nor is it simply a change of mind, not of behavior. Turning from sin ought to be a chief identifying mark of the believer. As I’ve said before, in Eastern Europe, unbelievers call evangelicals “repenters.” That’s not a bad label! If you’re in God’s Word daily, it confronts you with ways that you are not pleasing to God. Repentance is the proper response.

4. IT IS DANGEROUS NOT TO WORRY ABOUT THIS WARNING IF YOUR HEART IS CALLUSED, OR TO WORRY EXCESSIVELY ABOUT IT IF YOUR HEART IS TENDER.

Again, one reason that the author uses such strong terms is to shock those whose hearts are becoming callused so that they wake up before it’s too late. This isn’t just a warning to believers to grow up in their faith (although it *is* that). It’s a warning to those who *think* that they are believers, but are not, not to fall away into eternal judgment. True believers do not go back to their old way of life. True believers persevere in faith and obedience. We will see the same thing emphasized again in 10:36, where he tells them that they have need of endurance. Believing the best about them, he says, “But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul” (10:39).

In other words, there is only one way for those who have truly believed in Christ as Savior and Lord: to move ahead in faith and obedience, even in the face of trials or persecution. To give up the Christ who sacrificed Himself on the cross and go back to the pleasures of this evil world or to the empty shell of religion is extremely dangerous and possibly spiritually fatal!

If your heart is tender towards God, and you are striving daily against sin, then you should be concerned about this warning, but not *excessively* concerned. Keep walking with the Lord and He will bring you safely into His heavenly kingdom (2 Tim. 4:18)!

## Rebecca J. Anderson

### THE WARNING OF HEBREWS 6:4-8

<http://www.rj-anderson.com/docs/hebrews.html>

*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, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 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.  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; but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.*

This passage in the book of Hebrews has caused consternation to many a believer, and been the source of much controversy among Christians generally.  Read superficially, it strikes fear into the heart, for it seems at first to imply that those who have put their faith in Christ for salvation can lose that salvation.  Worse, it appears to insist that a Christian who loses his salvation can never regain it, and will experience the burning torment of hell just as though he had never professed faith.  Many young believers, struggling with persistent sin in their lives, have run aground on this passage, and sunk into deep discouragement.  However, this was surely not the author's intent, nor need it be the case.   For a closer scrutiny of the verses in their context paints a quite different picture, which, though still solemn, holds no dread for the true Christian.

The biggest key to unlocking the meaning of the passage is found in the context of the book of Hebrews as a whole.  Firstly, we need to consider the audience to whom the unknown author wrote.  It is all too easy to assume that everything in the book is addressed specifically to us as believers -- after all, isn't everything in the Bible written for us?  The answer is yes, and no.  Yes, because all Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for our instruction (2 Tim. 3:16).  But no, because our responsibility to learn from the Scripture does not demand that every portion of it apply directly to us.

The Mosaic Law is a prime example of this principle.  The Law was addressed to a select group of people -- the Israelites.  It was given for a distinct purpose and for a limited time only (Gal 3:19-25).  Believers today are not under the Law, but under grace (Rom. 6:14).  Does this mean that the Pentateuch is worthless to us?  Certainly not, for we can learn many vital and beautiful truths from Moses' writings about the character of God, His holiness and His unique relationship to Israel.  But the fact remains that those books were not written to us.  We are reading and benefitting from somebody else's mail.

A similar situation arises in the book of Hebrews.  The title itself gives us a major clue:  the book was written specifically to Jewish people.  That alone has the potential to make Gentile believers breathe a little easier.  Still, the question remains:  is it addressed to Jewish Christians?  And if it is, is there any reason to believe that it does not apply to Gentiles also?  Again, the answer is found in the context.  The second chapter of the book supplies the missing information:

*For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.  For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?*  (2:1-3)

We may well ask how it is possible for a Christian to neglect salvation.  The word neglect here means "to be careless of, to treat lightly."  Someone might say, "Ah, that means that a believer can be morally careless and make light of their Christian testimony, and so lose their salvation."  But the author has just said that these people need to pay closer attention, not to how they are living, but to what they have heard.  It is the message of salvation they are in danger of drifting away from, the word of the gospel spoken by the Lord to His apostles and passed on by them to the other disciples.  This is a crisis of belief, not of action.

But cannot a believer still fall away by ceasing to believe in Christ?  This question is addressed by the author in chapter three:

*Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God.  But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.  For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end...*(3:12-14)

The author's concern is that some of his audience will be found to be unbelievers at heart.  He states that those who hold fast to the truth, refusing to abandon it, thus prove themselves to be the real partakers of Christ.  The clear implication is that those who do not hold fast to the truth are not partakers of Christ, and never were.  The Lord taught this to His disciples (Jn. 8:31-32), and the apostles also taught it (Rom. 11:22, 1 Jn. 1:19).

On the other hand, after giving the solemn warning contained in Hebrews 6:3-8, the author comforts his hearers with an assurance of his confidence in their faith:  "But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way" (6:9).  In other words, he has spoken some things to them as though they were unbelievers, as though he were not sure of the reality of their faith; but in fact he does believe that the majority of them are genuine in their profession, and so he will address other exhortations to them as believers.

The book of Hebrews, therefore, was written to a group of Jewish disciples of Christ, who had not seen or heard Him in person during His life on earth, but had learned of Him from firsthand witnesses (2:3) and professed to believe in Him.  However, in the face of growing persecution there was a danger that they might reject that confession of faith, and return to the old ways of Judaism.  The author writes this book to warn them of the seriousness of rejecting Christ in this way, and urges them not to turn back but to go forward in faith and obedience to prove that their profession is genuine and their salvation real.

Having established the context, therefore, we may move on to a closer look at the passage in question.  Several phrases are used here which seem to imply that the audience are believers:  they have been "enlightened,"  they have "tasted of the heavenly gift," they have been made "partakers of the Holy Spirit."  This is strong language to use of the unsaved.  Can we be sure this does not refer to Christians?  Despite the controversy on this subject, we believe that the answer is "Yes."

Firstly, none of the terms used here are used anywhere else in Scripture to refer to salvation.  Nor are any of the normal New Testament terms and synonyms for salvation used in this passage.  Nowhere is it stated that these people have been justified, sanctified, born again, regenerated, or saved.  No mention is made of faith or of eternal life.  Verse 6 does not say that these people cannot be renewed to salvation, but that they cannot be renewed to repentance.  Repentance is only one element in salvation, not the totality of it.  John preached a message of repentance, and many came to be baptized of him (Mk. 1:4, Jn. 3:23).  Yet even those who had received John's baptism needed to put their faith in Christ in order to be saved (Ac. 19:4).

Secondly, the phrases here could certainly apply to unbelievers.  One may be *enlightened* by being instructed or informed about a truth previously unknown.  John said that Jesus Christ was the true light that enlightens every man (Jn. 1:9), but not every man is saved.  These Hebrews had been introduced to the Light of the world (Jn. 8:12), and seen the glory of God in Him (2 Cor. 4:6).  That did not mean, however, that they had received Him.  The word used twice in this verse, *tasted*, refers to experiencing something.  The experience is real, but it is not necessarily total.  For instance, the host at the banquet at Cana tasted the water that had been made into wine (Jn. 2:9).  Jesus tasted the vinegar and gall offered to him and refused to drink it (Mt. 27:34).  In a similar way, these people *tasted of the heavenly gift*.  The nature of this gift is not made clear.  However, Christ spoke of Himself as the gift of God (Jn. 4:10).  The gift may also be the spiritual blessings enjoyed by the church through Christ.  It is possible to experience rich spiritual blessings from God by association with His people, and yet still have an unbelieving and unregenerate heart, as the Israelites in the wilderness did (1 Cor. 10:1-5).

These people had been made *partakers of the Holy Spirit*.  This word partake refers to a partnership or association (Lk. 5:7).  It does not necessarily mean that these Hebrews were indwelt by the Spirit, but it tells us that they had lived in close association with Him and His power.  The Scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit does work in the lives and hearts of unbelievers, convicting them of sin (Jn. 16:8).  They had *tasted the good word of God*.  This was true of Israel even in idolatrous unbelief (Ezek. 33:30-32) -- they enjoyed hearing God's word as spoken through His prophets, but that did not make them believers.  Finally, they had also experienced *the powers of the age to come*.  This age is the Messianic Age, the Millenium, of which the miracles and signs done by Christ during His ministry on earth and by the apostles in the early days of the church were a foretaste.  These Jewish people had seen such wonders at close hand (Heb. 2:4).  Some of them may even have benefitted directly from healings and other miracles done by true believers in the power of the Spirit.  But that did not make them saved.

The author's warning amounts to this:  people who have had their minds opened to the truth about salvation, who have encountered Christ as He really is, have witnessed and been blessed by the ministry of the Spirit, have heard the full message of the gospel and recognized its goodness, and who have seen all the evidences available that Jesus really is the Messiah -- if people like this harden their hearts and turn away from the path of Christian discipleship to go back to Judaism, there is no help for them.  There is nothing further which can be done to persuade them to accept Christ:  they have already seen and experienced all the things designed to draw people to saving faith, but deliberately turned away from receiving Christ in order to preserve their own temporal comfort and security.  Of course such a person cannot be brought back to repentance.  As the author says, it is as though they are crucifying Jesus all over again with their own hands, and heaping shame upon Him, for by rejecting the gospel they side with those who despised and killed the Lord.

This point is further underlined by an illustration, or parable.  Inspired no doubt by Christ's parable of the sower and the seed (Mt. 13:18-23), the author compares the heart and life of a man to soil, and God's spiritual blessings to rain.  The life of a true believer, receiving the spiritual nourishment and refreshment coming from God, will naturally respond by producing fruit of obedience which God will bless (6:7).  The life of an apostate, however, receiving precisely the same spiritual nourishment and refreshment, produces evil and unbelief.  There is nothing wrong with the rain falling upon the ground; the fault lies with the essential nature of the ground on which it falls.  Increasing the amount of rain will not make a difference.  The bad ground will still bring up only thorns and thistles, because the quality of the soil is poor.  In the same way a person who has experienced all God has to offer an unbeliever and then turns his back on the truth cannot be renewed to repentance.  Nothing but punishment and destruction awaits a person of this kind (6:8).

Looking closely at this passage, then, we see that although it does contain an important warning, it holds no fear for the person who has truly received Christ as Lord and Saviour and whose life is bearing fruit for Him.  A true believer cannot lose his or her salvation.  The only people who need be afraid when reading this passage are those who are presently claiming to believe, but in their hearts are considering turning away from the truth to go back to their former way of life.  Such people need to realize that while those who reject Christ out of ignorance will always have a chance to repent, those who have already seen it all and then have turned their backs -- only the Lord knows who these people are -- will not have such a chance.

This is a solemn thought, and one that should make every professing Christian consider his ways and his heart.  Though Hebrews 6:3-8 was not directly addressed to believers in general, nevertheless as the inspired word of God it contains truths which all believers should carefully and prayerfully consider.

## Bob DeWaay

### Hebrews 6:4-8 on Apostasy: Can True Christians Commit Apostasy?

<http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue49.htm>

*"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, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 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. 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; but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned."* (**Hebrews 6:4-8**)

This passage raises several important questions. Is it possible for true Christians to fall away from the faith and not only become apostate, but irredeemably so? If so, is the Biblical doctrine of the perseverance of the saints proven false? If not, is this warning meaningless? What sin does the author have in mind that is so heinous that it precludes future repentance and forgiveness? To find answers to these important questions we must carefully exegete this passage in a manner that does justice to the whole of God's revelation in Scripture.

My thesis is that this warning against apostasy is always effective in the case of truly regenerate people. Obviously the writer of Hebrews did not believe that his readers had committed this sin (Hebrews 6:9 shows that he did not) or else the warning would only serve to underscore a hopeless situation. Its purpose is to keep people from apostasy, not to preach to the already damned. I will show that a warning does not have to go unheeded to be valid. I will also show that a real category of people fits the description, "apostate."

#### The Previous State of Apostates

A series of four participles describes the previous condition of the ones who after apostatizing cannot be renewed to repentance: "enlightened, tasted, made partakers," and "tasted." The recipients of this epistle would have considered those in this category to have experienced salvation, and themselves to be in this category. The four participles speak of personal experience of the light of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. William Lane comments, "The recital of what occurred with the reception of the gospel does not describe a succession of salvific events, but the one event of salvation that is viewed from different aspects and manifestations."1

Some have suggested that those described by these participles were not truly regenerate because the term "tasted" is used twice. They suppose that to "taste" means something less than a true experience of salvation. For example, **Arthur Pink strongly emphasizes the difference between tasting and eating, and concludes that those who had only "tasted" were as yet unconverted.2The problem with this conclusion is that it fails to take into account the Hebraic usage of this term as shown elsewhere in Hebrews.** For example, Hebrews 2:9 says that Jesus came to "taste death." Clearly this means to "experience death." Other examples of this usage are: 1Peter 2:3; John 8:52; and Psalm 34:8.

Some have assumed that "Enlightened" refers to "baptism." It more likely refers to the light of Christ that drove out the darkness at their reception of the gospel.3 William Lane comments, "What is signified is not simply instruction for salvation but the renewal of the mind and of life."4 Tasting the heavenly gift, as we have seen, means that they experienced it. The "gift from heaven"5 is redemption in Christ, through the gospel. Being "made partakers of the Holy Spirit" involves sharing with the redeemed community the indwelling Holy Spirit.6 Albert Barnes comments, "This is not language which can properly be applied to any one but a true Christian; and though it is true that an unpardoned sinner may be enlightened and awakened by the Holy Spirit, yet the language here used is not such as would be likely to be employed to describe his state."7 The last of the four participles denotes the experience of the Messianic age. The powers of the "age to come" are already present in the redeemed community who look forward to the final eschatological fulfillment.8

It is clear that the author of Hebrews intended his readers understand these terms as describing their experience of the gospel. The warning comes in the context of the author's concern about their complacency and unwillingness to learn (5:11-6:3). A failure to press on in one's Christian life is seen as a temptation to go back. Also, warning about falling away would make little sense if addressed to those who actually had nothing but an empty profession to begin with. It would make more sense to urge such people to be converted.

#### Fallen Away

The sorrowful and tragic act of apostasy (verse 6) is expressed by just one word in the Greek, parapesontas ("fall away"). To "fall away" seems dramatically incongruous in the context of the blessed privileges described in verses 4 & 5. Everything about the gracious work of God through the gospel leads one to expect an outcome of salvation. That redeemed people fall away is not God's purpose in regenerating people. This makes the warning shocking and is part of the reason for the controversy that has attended this passage.

Nothing in the grammar lessens the impact. Lane comments, "The aorist tense indicates a decisive moment of commitment to apostasy. In the LXX, the term parapiptein has reference to the expression of a total attitude reflecting deliberate and calculated renunciation of God (Ezek. 20:27; 22:4)."9 He rightly points out that this is the equivalent of the idea of Hebrews 3:12 where the term apostenai is used in the phrase "falling away from the living God." Therefore Hebrews 6:6 is clearly a warning against apostasy. Lenski aptly describes it: "There is no need to say more, this one word tells the whole story. It is tragic to the highest degree."10

The impact of the warning is heightened by the horrific consequences. Apostates are beyond hope, it is "impossible to renew them again to repentance" (Hebrews 6:6). The reason for this impossibility is the shame and reproach they have brought to Christ: they "crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame." The reference is to the mockery to which Jesus was subject at His trial and crucifixion. The passage uses two present participles (literally translated "crucifying again" and "exposing to public humiliation"11) to describe the state of apostates and why it is impossible for them to be renewed. Apostates are disillusioned followers. These make the best propaganda artists against a movement. Apostates bring continued shame and reproach to the Lord and thus dishonor Him in the most wicked manner. For this reason, some have concluded that this sin is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and is unforgivable as Jesus taught in the gospels (see Matthew 12:31). For example, **John Calvin wrote: For he falls away who forsakes the word of God, who extinguishes its light, who deprives himself of the taste of the heavens or gift, who relinquishes the participation of the Spirit. Now this is wholly to renounce God. We now see whom he excluded from the hope of pardon, even the apostates who alienated themselves from the Gospel of Christ, which they had previously embraced, and from the grace of God; and this happens to no one but to him who sins against the Holy Spirit**.12

Lenski concurs: "The word blasphemy is not used here as it is in the passages in the Gospels that speak about the sin against the Holy Ghost; but "exposing to public ignominy" is a full equivalent."13 Likewise, Simon Kistemaker writes, "**Deliberately sinning against God in full awareness and knowledge of God's divine revelation constitutes sin against the Holy Spirit** (Matt. 12:32; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10). This sin God does not forgive."14

Further support for the identification of apostasy as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit can be found in the parallel warning in Hebrews 10:26-29. There willful sinners are warned of receiving a more severe punishment than those who thus sinned under Moses because they have "insulted the Spirit of grace" (verse 29). The book of Hebrews is filled with quotations and allusions to the Old Testament. Therefore, the warning against apostasy may have roots in Numbers 15:22-31. Here there is a distinction between the one who "unwittingly" sins and the one who sins "defiantly." The first is offered atonement upon making the appropriate sacrifices, the later is cut off. The terminology is very similar to the teaching in Hebrews: "But the person who does anything defiantly, whether he is native or an alien, that one is blaspheming the Lord; and that person shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the Lord and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt shall be on him" (Numbers 15:30,31). Defiance is blasphemy and it shall not be forgiven.

We need to understand that this is not about backsliding. If it were, many, if not most of the readers of Hebrews, would lose hope. What is being described is a willful renunciation of the faith, not a Christian having through weakness, carelessness, or temporary indifference fallen into serious sin. Even Peter who denied His Lord three times was forgiven and renewed to fellowship. Barnes comments on the meaning of "fallen away" which he considers the equivalent of "apostatize from," "[It] implies an entire renunciation of Christianity, or a going back to a state of Judaism, heathenism, or sin."15 Calvin offers this explanation: "But the Apostle speaks not here of theft, or perjury, or murder, or drunkenness, or adultery; but **he refers to a total defection or falling away from the Gospel, when a sinner offends not God in some one thing, but entirely renounces his grace**."16

#### An Illustration Tilled Land

The author of Hebrews offers an illustration to accentuate the warning: "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; but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned" (Hebrews 6:7-8). The work of the Holy Spirit through the gospel of Christ is a work on the human heart intended to cause its recipients to bring forth fruit. Thorns and thistles are reminiscent of God's curse on the ground in Genesis 3:18. Blessing and cursing are Old Testament themes central to the book of Hebrews. Those who received promises from God and believed God are considered great people of faith (Hebrews 11). Others received the promises but died in disobedience and unbelief (Hebrews 3:16-19). In Deuteronomy 28 - 30 God gave great promises of blessing and dire warnings of curses. Christians, according to the book of Hebrews, have even greater promises and more severe warnings.

Lane sees the warning as addressed to the Christian community: "But if the Christian community should become apostate, it would be like a field which was well watered and cultivated, but which then produced only thorns and thistles."17 Surely we should bear in mind the heightened importance of the community of faith in Hebrew thought compared to our tendency to think individualistically. The illustrations in the book of Hebrews are drawn from the Old Testament God's dealings with the Jewish community. There are individual ramifications and it is individuals like the great people of faith in chapter 11 who are commended. Yet the author of Hebrews is writing to a group of Christians who are balking at going on to maturity and whom he fears will consequently go back to their old beliefs, in their case Judaism. The rain of the Holy Spirit is intended to bring forth fruit. A lack of hunger for the teachings of the Holy Spirit in Scripture is an early warning sign of possible apostasy.

#### Issues and Applications

Most of the controversy about Hebrews 6:4-8 concerns its relationship to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Exegetically, it is clear enough what the passage says. The problem is in reconciling it with other passages in the Bible. For example, consider John 6:37-39: "All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day." Similarly, Paul taught in Romans that all whom the Father foreknew will ultimately be glorified: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified" (Romans 8:28-30). The rest of this chapter also offers strong support for the perseverance of the saints. Some Evangelicals do not believe in perseverance and readily accept the idea of true Christians falling from the faith. However, such persons should realize that perseverance is a clear and important Biblical teaching. The thing that makes Hebrews 6:4-8 and other passages such as Hebrews 10:26 startling and disconcerting is the very fact that true Christians have such a strong hope of eternal life, one based on the promises of God and the finished work of Christ. To put Christ to open shame and trample under foot the blood of the covenant is rightly anathema to us. We believe that He who began His work in us will finish it (Philippians 1:6). Falling away is not an acceptable outcome of our faith (1Peter 1:9; see also 1Peter 1:2-5 which offers strong assurance of the perseverance of the saints).

Those who believe in losing one's salvation should also realize that this section of Hebrews is not talking about losing and regaining faith, but renouncing it so as to never be able to regain it. It is not being saved then lost then saved again, rather saved then lost period. There would be no need to call in a traveling evangelist to seek to remedy this situation. This sober and fearful possibility is difficult for even those who have no belief in perseverance to accept. Thus it is a problem passage for all.

The teaching on perseverance is that Christians will persevere, not that they will be saved even if they do not! "We know that no one who is born of God sins [as a continuous state of affairs]; but He who was born of God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him" (1John 5:18). Perseverance is a promise that was given in the Old Testament: "And I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; and I will put the fear of Me in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me" (Jeremiah 32:40). Thus belief in perseverance can properly be distinguished from the much abused and crass "once saved always saved" credo that some substitute for it.18 Perseverance does not suggest that those who fail to persevere are saved. The promise of God is that we will persevere.

#### Resolving the Problems

Therefore, the problem remains of reconciling the warning against apostasy with the promises of perseverance. I see three possibilities: 1) That the promises of perseverance are not really what they appear and many true Christians will lose their faith and their salvation. 2) That apostates are people who were never truly regenerate but had participated in the experiences and privileges of the redeemed community. 3) That the warnings against apostasy are effective: they accomplish their purpose and the truly regenerate always heed the warnings and do not apostatize.

#### Position One: True Christians Do Apostatize

The first of these possibilities is the least attractive. Though the language in Hebrew 6:4-8 is very vivid and concrete, especially in the NASB translation, it is not clear that the author had in mind any of his readers. The author of Hebrews repeatedly gave stern warnings coupled with assurance that his readers had not already fallen. For example, after the extended warning of falling into unbelief and failing to enter God's rest in chapters 3 & 4, the author concludes: "Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience" (Hebrews 4:11). The warning was to motivate, not condemn. Likewise our warning passage in Hebrews 6 is followed by this assessment of the readers' own condition: "But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way" (Hebrews 6:9). The warning in Hebrews 10:26f is just as severe but is followed by these comforting words: "But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul" (Hebrews 10:39). "We" here is the Christian community, the author included. It is clear that the writer of Hebrews did believe in persevering faith. He evidently believed the Holy Spirit's warnings would be effectual.

#### Position Two: Apostates Were Never Truly Regenerate

The second possibility has more to commend it and a number of Biblical commentators have adopted it.19 The strength of the view (that these were people who were part of the community of faith but not truly elect) is that the Biblical examples of apostates fall into this category. The clearest New Testament example is Judas. **Judas had all of the privileges of the other disciples**, had gone out with them and healed the sick and cast out demons, and had shared their many experiences in learning at the feet of the Master. Yet Judas had a demon and died in his own miserable sin. He fits into the category of people of which our Lord warns: "Many will say to Me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'" (Matthew 7:22,23). These had indications of involvement with the powerful work of the Holy Spirit, yet Christ said He never knew them.

Another New Testament example is **Simon Magus of Acts 8**. John wrote about false teachers: "They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us" (1John 2:19). This is further evidence of a class of "Christians" who had shared experiences with the larger community but were not truly regenerate. Their leaving was what ultimately showed their true condition. Furthermore, the parable of the sower and seeds (Luke 8:11-18) predicts a variety of responses to the word of God including joyful reception that eventually gives way to falling away (verse 13).

More evidence for this view is found in the Old Testament citations and allusions throughout Hebrews. The whole of **Israel** was the community of faith that departed from Egypt, wandered through the wilderness, and given hope of the promised land. The community as a whole consisted both of people with faith (Hebrews 11) and those who died in unbelief (Hebrews 3:19). In Romans 9, Paul distinguishes between those of Israel who were merely "children of the flesh" and those who were children of promise. Esau is an example of a fleshly child and the author of Hebrews uses him as an example of one who was unable to gain repentance (Hebrews 12:17). Similarly, 1Corinthians 10 uses the community of Israel who were all "baptized" in the cloud and the sea (verses 1-4; symbolizing baptism in the Spirit and water), yet some fell into idolatry and perished as an example and warning to the church. Sharing the experiences of the larger community and then turning from Christ to idols would result in the same tragic consequences as it did for those following Moses.

Since the visible church consists of all those who profess faith in Christ, but the invisible church consists of only those who are truly God's elect, the church always has in her midst individuals who are like Judas among the twelve. Those who hold the second view about apostasy believe that apostates always come from this category of people. In as much as they are fully participating in the community of faith, it can be said that they were enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted of the powers of the world to come. Their falling away seals their damnation and serves as a warning to the rest of the flock. However, they were never truly regenerate and a part of God's elect.

#### Position Three: The Warning Is Always Effectual

The third option is intriguing. The warning against apostasy is the means God uses to keep His people from apostasy. What is appealing about this is that it takes the language of the text with utmost seriousness and applies it to all Christians as the author of Hebrews intended. The four participles that describe the experience of those who are warned clearly describes Christian experience. There is no reason that anyone should read these verses and think, "I am one of the elect, this does not apply to me." The more one has experienced the work of the Holy Spirit in his or her life the more sober the warning. Those who have been given much are more accountable for what they have (Luke 12:48). Therefore, **the sober warning applies to true Christians.**

A strong proponent of this view was Albert Barnes. He wrote, "The knowledge that apostasy would be fatal, and there could be no hope of being saved should it once occur would be a more effectual preventive of the danger than all the other means that could be used. . . . It may be added, that **the means used by God to preserve his people from apostasy, have been entirely effective.**"20 Barnes did not believe that any true Christian ever has committed or will commit apostasy.21 God's means of keeping His elect from apostasy are many, not the least of which is the warning itself.

Some will find this position unappealing because they assume that if none of the truly regenerate will fall away, then the warning is of no real consequence. If apostasy is an impossibility, then it is meaningless and mute. However, **one can make a legitimate distinction between an impossibility and what I call an unactualized theoretical possibility.** Hebrews does not call apostasy impossible. What is impossible is to renew to repentance one who has committed apostasy. The idea of renouncing one's faith, denying Christ, and living a life of unmitigated sin is surely within the realm of things humanly possible. That some outward professors like Judas have already done this lends even more credibility to potential, eternal danger.

Yet if we have assurance of salvation and evidence in our lives of truly being children of God, surely it is true that we will not apostatize. But if we were to do so we can be sure that we would be facing eternal damnation with no hope of repentance. It is legitimate to introduce the possibility of something that will not happen to motivate one to avoid it. We regularly warn children about things they hopefully never do. For example we tell them that if they play on a busy freeway they will be killed. If this never happens, the warning is still valid. As long as the danger is something within the realm of things possible for humans in the world as we know it, the warning has motivational currency.

For example, consider the possibility of all life on earth being annihilated by a nuclear holocaust. Humankind has the means, we are told, to do this. Though it has never happened and many never happen, it is real enough to motivate us to avoid it. The Bible teaches that God Himself will judge the earth, so we can be assured He is not going to allow us to destroy ourselves entirely before He causes all the prophecies in the Bible to be fulfilled. Yet we would be fools not to take the nuclear threat seriously. An impossibility is different. It is something that cannot be because of the nature of things. We cannot sprout wings and fly to the moon and we cannot turn lead into gold. Known impossibilities create neither fear nor hope, they are the stuff of fantasy or irrationality. Apostasy fits into the former category. **It is something that could be, but for the elect will not be.** Thus it is an unactualized theoretical possibility, not an impossibility. Its possibility is as real as a nuclear holocaust.

#### Conclusion

Positions two and three outlined above are not mutually exclusive. It is true that people who have been a part of the visible church commit apostasy. In their case, they left us because they were not really of us, John 2:19. That God has allowed this is part of His means of warning His people. Jesus knew who Judas was and what he would do, but brought him into the twelve. The story of his wickedness has served as a warning to all who have read the gospel account. This goes for Balaam, Saul, Esau, Korah, Hymenaeus, Alexander (1Timothy 1:19,20) and all others who have likewise made shipwreck of the faith. These appeared to fit the category described by the four participles of Hebrews 6:4,5 but it turned out that they did not fully experience electing grace.

It is also true that the warning against apostasy is given to the whole visible church. It is real and has motivational currency for the truly regenerate. The warning is so powerful that it is effectual and none of those the Father has given the Son will perish. They heed the warning and flee to the grace of God which enables His people to live an overcoming life. They know that if they did blaspheme the Holy Spirit by insulting Him and recrucifying Christ, putting Him to open shame, they would be irredeemably damned. This fearful, sobering reality drives God's people back into His loving arms. This, I believe, was why the writer of Hebrews was convinced that his readers had "faith to the preserving of the soul" (Hebrews 10:39).

## John Piper

[Hebrews 6:4–8](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%206.4%E2%80%938) says,

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, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 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. 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; 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 so 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 makes us truly happy 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](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%206.4%E2%80%938). 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](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%206.1) says, “Let us press on to maturity.” And verse 3 says, “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, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 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](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%206.4%E2%80%936))

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 (verses 4–5).

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](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%202.4)).

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 change 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](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%2013.12) 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](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%209.14); [Titus 2:14](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Titus%202.14)). 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 Christ.” 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](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%2012.16%E2%80%9317). 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. 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](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%203.8), [15](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Hebrews%203.15); [4:7](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Hebrews%204.7)) 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.”

Esau is an illustration of what the writer has in mind in [Hebrews 6:6](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%206.6) when he says it is impossible to renew this person again to repentance. Here 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. O, 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 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](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rom%208.29%E2%80%9339); [Jude 24–25](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Jude%2024%E2%80%9325); [Ephesians 1:3–14](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Eph%201.3%E2%80%9314); [1 John 2:19](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20John%202.19); [1 Peter 1:5](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Pet%201.5);[Philippians 1:6](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Phil%201.6); [2:13](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Philippians%202.13); [1 Corinthians 1:8–9](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Cor%201.8%E2%80%939); [1 Thessalonians 5:23–24](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Thess%205.23%E2%80%9324);[Ezekiel 11:19](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ezek%2011.19); [36:27](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ezekiel%2036.27); [Deuteronomy 30:6](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Deut%2030.6); [Jeremiah 24:7](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Jer%2024.7); [32:40](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Jeremiah%2032.40)).

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; 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 this: 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](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%203.14) (and 3:6).

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

The key point 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](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%206.6) describes), then we have not become partakers of Christ. (The same argument holds for the tense of the verb in [Hebrews 3:6](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%203.6).) Therefore, it seems clear that this writer does not believe you can be in Christ and then out again.

4. Consider [Hebrews 10:14](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%2010.14).

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

If [Hebrews 6:6](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%206.6) 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 reality suggests that [Hebrews 6:6](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%206.6) 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](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%2013.20%E2%80%9321).

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, 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](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ezek%2011.19); [36:27](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ezekiel%2036.27);[Jeremiah 24:7](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Jer%2024.7); [32:40](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Jeremiah%2032.40)). 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 truth means that [Hebrews 6:6](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%206.6) 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 it’s 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 — if 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 was 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.

# Apostasy Of True Believers

## David Guzik

### vv. 1-8

A. The essential nature of maturity.

1. (1a) Going beyond the basics.

Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary *principles* of Christ, let us go on to perfection,

a. **Therefore**: The writer has just rebuked his readers for their spiritual immaturity; but he knows that nothing is gained by treating them as immature. So he moves on to other ideas.

b. **Elementary principles**: This has the idea of "rudiments" or "ABCs." They are basic building blocks that are necessary, but must be built upon - otherwise you just have a foundation and no structure.

c. **Perfection**: This is the ancient Greek word *teleiotes*, which is much better understood as "maturity." The writer to the Hebrews is not trying to tell us that we can reach perfection on this side of eternity, but we can and should reach a place of maturity in Jesus. So the call is plain: **let us go on to perfection**.

2. (1b-2) Some of the "basics" to go beyond.

Not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.

a. These "basics" are given in three pairs: **repentance** and **faith** go together. **Baptisms** and **laying on of hands** go together. **Resurrection of the dead** and **eternal judgment** go together.

b. **Not laying again the foundation**: Many people regard this as a Biblical list of important "foundations" for the Christian life. Bible study series have been taught developing each one of these topics, out of the thought that this is good list of basic doctrines. But that isn't the writer's point here at all. To understand this list, you must ask a basic question: What is distinctively *Christian* about this list? Where is the specific mention of Jesus or salvation by grace alone? Can you believe or practice these things and not be a follower of Jesus Christ, believing Him to be the Messiah?

i. "When we consider the 'rudiments' one by one, it is remarkable how little in the list is distinctive of Christianity, for practically every item could have its place in a fairly orthodox Jewish community. . . . Each of them, indeed, acquires a new significance in a Christian context; but the impression we get is that existing Jewish beliefs and practices were used as a foundation on which to build Christian truth." (Bruce)

c. Not even **baptisms**, as it is used in this passage, is necessarily Christian. The specific ancient Greek word translated **baptisms** is *not* the word regularly used in the New Testament to describe Christian baptism. It is the word used on two other specific occasions (Heb. 9:10 and Mar. 7:4) to refer to Jewish ceremonial washings.

i. The New English Bible translation reflects this, translating **doctrine of baptisms** as "instruction about cleansing rites."

d. In this case, the *elementary principles* to move beyond are all items in the "common ground" between Christianity and Judaism. This was a "safe" common ground these Jewish Christians retreated to.

i. Because Christianity did grow out of Judaism, it was a more subtle temptation for a Jewish Christian to slip back into Judaism than it was for a formerly pagan Christian to go back to his pagan ways.

ii. Of course, these Jewish Christians did not want to abandon *religion*, but they did want to make it less distinctively *Christian*. Therefore, they went back to this "common ground" to avoid persecution. Living in this comfortable common ground, you would not stick out so much. A Jew and a Christian together could say, "Let's repent, let's have faith, let's perform ceremonial washings," and so forth. But this was a subtle denial of Jesus.

iii. This is entirely characteristic of those who feel discouraged, and wish to give up. There is always the temptation to still be religious, but not so "fanatical" about Jesus.

3. (3) A statement of hope and dependence on God.

And this we will do if God permits.

a. **If God permits**: This should not be taken as implying that God may not want them to go on to maturity, past those basics common to Christianity and Judaism.

b. Instead, **if God permits** expresses the believers' complete dependence on God. If we do press on to maturity, we realize that it only happens at God's pleasure.

B. The danger of falling away.

1. Understanding an approach to controversial passages like this.

a. We must first be concerned with understanding what the text says (exposition), before we are concerned with fitting what it says into a system of theology.

b. Systems of theology are important, because the Bible *does not* contradict itself; but the way to right systems *begins with a right understanding of the text, not one that bends the text to fit into a system*.

i. "We come to this passage ourselves with the intention to read it with the simplicity of a child, and whatever we find therein to state it; and if it may not seem to agree with something we have hitherto held, we are prepared to cast away every doctrine of our own, rather than one passage of Scripture." (Spurgeon)

ii. "We had better far be inconsistent with ourselves than with the inspired Word. I have been called an Arminian Calvinist or a Calvinistic Arminian, and I am quite content so long as I can keep close to my Bible." (Spurgeon)

c. Satan knows Scripture, and this passage has rightly been called "one of the Devil's favorite passages" for its ability to be taken out of context for condemning the struggling believer. Many have felt like giving up after hearing Satan "preach a sermon" on this text!

2. (4-6) The impossibility of repentance for those who have fallen away after receiving blessing from God.

For *it is* impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put *Him* to an open shame.

a. **For it is impossible**: The word **impossible** is put in a position of emphasis. The writer to the Hebrews is not saying it is just difficult, but truly without possibility.

i. Note the other uses of **impossible** in Hebrews: It is *impossible* for God to lie (Heb. 6:18). It is *impossible* that the blood of bulls and goats can take away sin (Heb. 10:4). Without faith it is *impossible* to please God (Heb. 11:6).

ii. "This word \***impossible** *stands immovable*." (Alford)

b. **Who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come**: Their experience is impressive. The big debate is whether this is the experience of salvation, or the experience of something short of salvation.

i. **Enlightened**: This ancient Greek word has the same meaning as the English word. These people have experienced the light of God shining upon them.

ii. **Tasted**: This word speaks of a full, real experience (as in how Jesus *tasted death* in Heb. 2:9). **The heavenly gift** is probably salvation (Rom. 6:23 and Eph. 2:8).

iii. **Partakers of the Holy Spirit** is an unique term, having to do with receiving the Holy Spirit and having fellowship with the Holy Spirit.

iv. **Tasted the good word of God** means they have experienced the goodness of God's word, and have seen its work in their lives.

v. The **powers of the age of come** is a way to describe God's supernatural power. The ones written of here have indeed **tasted** of these powers.

c. One of the most heated debates over any New Testament passage is focused on this text. The question is simple: Are these people who have had these impressive spiritual experiences in fact Christians? Are they God's elect, chosen before the foundation of the world?

i. Commentators divide on this issue, each deciding the issue with great certainty but with no agreement.

ii. Remember that one can have great spiritual experiences and still not be saved (Mat. 7:21-23). One can even do many religious things and still not be saved. The perfect example of this are the Pharisees, who evangelized (Mat. 23:15), prayed impressively (Mat. 23:14), made religious commitments (Mat. 23:16), tithed rigorously (Mat. 23:23), honored religious traditions (Mat. 23:29-31) and who fasted (Luk. 18:12).

iii. Yet, from a *human perspective*, who would call anyone who seemed to have the credentials mentioned in Hebrews 6:4-5 a non-Christian? We might make that person an elder! From all *human observation*, we must say these are Christians spoken of in Heb. 6:4-5.

iv. It is possible to display some fruit or spiritual growth, then to die spiritually, showing that the "soil of the heart" was never right (Mar. 4:16-19).

v. So are they Christians? From a human perspective we would say they are. Yet, from God's perspective, it is impossible to say on this side of eternity.

d. **For it is impossible . . . if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance**: If these people are Christians or not, once they have come to this place, it is **impossible** for them to repent.

i. If these are just Christians who "lost their salvation," the terrible fact is that they can *never* regain it. This passage was used by some in the early church (like Montanists and Novatianists) to say that there was no possibility of restoration if one sinned significantly after their baptism.

ii. Others have explained it by saying that this is all merely a hypothetical warning, in light of Heb. 6:9. So, they say, no one can really lose their salvation. But what good is it to warn someone against something that can't happen?

iii. Still others think that this penalty deals only with reward, not with salvation itself. They stress the idea that **repentance** is called **impossible**, not *salvation*.

iv. This difficult passage is best understood in the context of Heb. 6:1-2. The writer to the Hebrews means that if they do retreat back to Judaism, all the religious "repentance" in the world will do them no good. Their forsaking of Jesus is tantamount to crucifying Him all over again, especially if they were to express their repentance in traditional Jewish forms: especially animal sacrifice, which denies the total work of Jesus for them on the cross.

e. **If they fall away**: Remember there is a great difference between *falling* and **falling away**. Falling away isn't just falling into some sin, it is actually departing from Jesus Himself. *For a righteous man may fall seven times and rise again, but the wicked shall fall by calamity.* (Pro. 24:16) The difference is between a Peter and a Judas. If you depart from Jesus, there is no hope!

i. The message to these Christians who felt like giving up was clear: if you don't continue on with Jesus, don't suppose you will find salvation by just going on with the old basics that are common to Judaism; if you aren't saved in Jesus, you aren't saved!

ii. If one falls like this, does it mean they can't repent? That God *prohibits* their repentance? Remember first that repentance itself is a gift from God; no one genuinely repents without God's enabling. Second, if one does repent, that in itself is evidence that they have not truly fallen away.

iii. The idea is not that "if you fall away, you can't come back to Jesus ever," but that "if you turn your back on Jesus, don't expect to find salvation anywhere else, especially in the foundations of Judaism apart from the fullness of Jesus."

iv. "This passage has nothing to do with those who fear lest it condemns them. The presence of that anxiety, like the cry which betrayed the real mother in the days of Solomon, establishes beyond a doubt that you are not one that has fallen away beyond the possibility of renewal to repentance." (Meyer)

3. (7-8) An illustration of the serious consequences of falling away.

For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; but if it bears thorns and briars, *it is* rejected and near to being cursed, whose end *is* to be burned.

a. **For the earth which drinks in the rain . . . and bears herbs useful . . . receives blessing from God**: When the **earth** receives rain, and then **bears** useful plants, it then fulfills its purpose and justifies the blessing of rain sent upon it. The writer to the Hebrews applies the point: "You've been blessed. But where's the fruit?" God is looking for what grows in us after He blesses us, especially what grows in terms of maturity.

b. **But if it bears thorns and briars, it is rejected**: If ground that is blessed by rain refuses to bear fruit, then who can blame the farmer for burning it?

c. The picture presented reminds us that growth and bearing fruit is important to keep from falling away. When we really bear fruit, we abide in Jesus (Joh. 15:5) and in no danger of falling away.

## Adam Clarke – Regenerate Apostasy

### v. 4

 Verse 4. *For it is impossible for those who were once* *enlightened*] Before I proceed to explain the different terms in these verses, it is necessary to give my opinion of their design and meaning: 1. I do not consider them as having any reference to any person *professing Christianity*. 2. They do not belong, nor are they applicable, to *backsliders* of any kind. 3. They belong to *apostates* from Christianity; to such as reject the whole *Christian system*, and its *author*, the Lord Jesus. 4. And to those of them only who join with the blaspheming Jews, call Christ an impostor, and vindicate his murderers in having crucified him as a malefactor; and thus they render their salvation impossible, by *wilfully* and *maliciously* rejecting the Lord that bought them. No man *believing in the Lord Jesus* as the great sacrifice for sin, and acknowledging *Christianity* as a *Divine revelation*, is here intended, though he may have unfortunately *backslidden* from any degree of the salvation of God.

 The design of these solemn words is evidently, *First*, to show the Hebrews that apostasy from the highest degrees of grace was possible; and that those who were highest in the favour of God might sin against him, lose it, and perish everlastingly. *Secondly*, to warn them against such an awful state of perdition, that they might not be led away, by either the persuasions or persecutions of their countrymen, from the truth of the heavenly doctrine which had been delivered to them. And, *Thirdly*, to point out the destruction which was shortly to come upon the Jewish nation.

 *Once enlightened-Thoroughly instructed* in the nature and design of the Christian religion, having received the knowledge of the truth, Heb 10:32; and being convinced of sin, righteousness, and judgment, and led to Jesus the Saviour of sinners.

 *Tasted of the heavenly gift*] Having received *the knowledge of* *salvation by the remission of sins*, through the Day Spring which from on high had visited them; such having received *Christ, the* *heavenly gift* of God's infinite *love*, Joh 3:16; the *living bread that came down from heaven*, Joh 6:51; and thus *tasting that the Lord is gracious*; Heb 6:1; Heb 2:3, and witnessing the full effects of the Christian religion.

 *Partakers of the Holy Ghost*] The Spirit himself witnessing with their spirits that they were the children of God, and thus assuring them of God's mercy towards them, and of the efficacy of the atonement through which they had received such blessings.

### v. 5

 Verse 5. *And have tasted the good word of God*] Have had this proof of the excellence of the promise of God in sending the Gospel, the Gospel being itself the *good word* of a *good God*, the reading and preaching of which they find sweet to the taste of their souls. Genuine believers have an *appetite* for the word of God; they *taste* it, and then their *relish* for it is the more abundantly increased. The more they get, the more they wish to have.

 *The powers of the world to come*] δυναμειςτεμελλοντοςαιωνος. These words are understood two ways: 1. *The powers of the world to* *come* may refer to the stupendous *miracles* wrought in confirmation of the Gospel, the Gospel dispensation being *the world to come* in the Jewish phraseology, as we have often seen; and that δυναμις is often taken for a *mighty work* or *miracle*, is plain from various parts of the gospels. The prophets had declared that the Messiah, when he came, should work many miracles, and should be as mighty in word and deed as was *Moses*; see De 18:15-19. And they particularly specify the giving *sight* to the *blind, hearing* to the *deaf, strength* to the *lame*, and *speech* to the *dumb*; Heb 35:5; Heb 35:6. All these miracles Jesus Christ did in the sight of this very people; and thus they had the highest evidence they could have that Jesus was this promised Messiah, and could have no pretence to *doubt* his mission, or apostatize from the Christian faith which they had received; and hence it is no wonder that the apostle denounces the most awful judgments of God against those who had apostatized from the faith, which they had seen thus confirmed.

 2. The words have been supposed to apply to those *communications* and *foretastes* of *eternal blessedness*, or of the *joys of the world* *to come*, which they who are justified through the blood of the covenant, and walk faithfully with their God, experience; and to this sense the word γευσαμενους *have tasted*, is thought more properly to apply. But γευομαι, *to taste*, signifies *to experience* or *have full proof* of a thing. Thus, *to taste death*, Mt 16:28, is *to die*, to come under the *power of death*, fully to *experience* its destructive nature as far as the body is concerned. See also Lu 9:27; Joh 8:52. And it is used in the same sense in Heb 2:9 of this epistle, where Christ is said to *taste death for every man*; for notwithstanding the *metaphor*, which the reader will see explained in the note on the above place, the word necessarily means that he did *actually die*, that he *fully* *experienced* death; and had the fullest proof of it and of its malignity he could have, independently of the corruption of his flesh; for over this death could have no power. And to *taste* that *the Lord is gracious*, Heb 6:1; Heb 2:3, is to experience God's graciousness thoroughly, in being made *living stones, built up* *into a spiritual house*, constituted *holy priests* to *offer* *spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God*; see Heb 6:1; Heb 2:5. And in this sense it is used by the purest Greek writers. See several examples in *Schleusner*.

 It seems, therefore, that the first opinion is the best founded.

### v. 6

 Verse 6. *If they shall fall away*] καιπαραπεσοντας *And having* *fallen away*. I can express my own mind on this translation nearly in the words of Dr. Macknight: "The participles φωτισθεντας, *who* *were enlightened*, γευσαμενους, *have tasted*, and γενηθεντας, *were made partakers*, being *aorists*, are properly rendered by our translators in the *past time*; wherefore, παραπεσοντας, being an aorist, ought likewise to have been translated in the *past time*, HAVE *fallen away*. Nevertheless, our translators, following *Beza*, who without any authority from ancient MSS. has inserted in his version the word *si*, *if*, have rendered this clause, IF *they fall* *away*, that this text might not appear to contradict the doctrine of the *perseverance of the saints*. But as no translator should take upon him to add to or alter the Scriptures, for the sake of any favourite doctrine, I have translated παραπεσοντας in the *past* time, *have fallen away*, according to the true import of the word, as standing in connection with the other aorists in the preceding verses."

 Dr. Macknight was a Calvinist, and he was a thorough scholar and an honest man; but, professing to give a *translation* of *the* *epistle*, he consulted not his creed but his candour. Had our translators, who were excellent and learned men, leaned less to their own peculiar creed in the present authorized version, the Church of Christ in this country would not have been agitated and torn as it has been with polemical divinity.

 It appears from this, whatever sentiment may gain or lose by it, that there is a fearful possibility of *falling away from the grace* *of God*; and if this scripture did not say so, there are many that do say so. And were there no scripture express on this subject, the nature of the present state of man, which is a state of *probation* or *trial*, must necessarily imply it. Let him who most assuredly standeth, take heed lest he fall.

 *To renew them again unto repentance*] As *repentance* is the *first* step that a sinner must take in order to return to God, and as sorrow for sin must be useless in itself unless there be a proper sacrificial offering, these having rejected the only available sacrifice, their repentance for sin, had they any, would be nugatory, and their salvation impossible on this simple account; and this is the very reason which the apostle immediately subjoins:-

 *Seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God*] They reject him on the ground that he was an impostor, and *justly* put to death. And thus they are said to *crucify him to themselves*-to do that in their present apostasy which the Jews did; and they show thereby that, had they been present when he was crucified, they would have joined with his murderers.

 *And put him to an open shame.*] παραδειγματιζοντας. *And have* *made* him *a public example*; or, *crucifying unto themselves and* *making the Son of God a public example*. That is, they show openly that they judge Jesus Christ to have been worthy of the death which he suffered, and was justly made a public example by being crucified. This shows that it is *final apostasy*, by the total rejection of the Gospel, and blasphemy of the Saviour of men, that the apostle has in view. *See the note on "Heb 6:4"*.

### v. 7

 Verse 7. *For the earth which drinketh in the rain*] As much as if he had said: In giving up such apostates as utterly incurable, we act as men do in cultivating their fields; for as the ground, which drinketh in the rain by which the providence of God waters it, brings forth fruit to compensate the toil of the tiller, and continues to be cultivated, God granting his blessing to the labours of the husbandman; so,

### v. 8

 Verse 8. *That which beareth thorns and briers is rejected*] That is: The land which, notwithstanding the most careful cultivation, receiving also in due times the early and latter rain, produces nothing but thorns and briers, or noxious weeds of different kinds, is rejected, αδοκιμος, is given up as unimprovable; *its briers, thorns, and brushwood burnt down*; and then *left to be pastured on by the beasts of the field*. This seems to be the custom in *husbandry* to which the apostle alludes. The nature of the case prevents us from supposing that he alludes to the custom of *pushing and burning*, in order to farther *fertilization*. This practice has been common from very early times:-

 *Saepe etiam* steriles incendere profuit agros;

 *Atque levem stipulam crepitantibus urere flammis*.

 VIRG. Geor. i., 5:84.

 Long practice has a sure *improvement* found,

 With *kindled fires* to *burn* the *barren ground*;

 When the light stubble to the flames resign'd,

 Is driven along, and crackles in the wind.

 DRYDEN.

 But this, I say the circumstances of the case prevent us from supposing to be intended.

 Is *nigh unto cursing*] It is acknowledged, almost on all hands, that this epistle was written *before* the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. This verse is in my opinion a proof of it, and here I suppose the apostle refers to that *approaching destruction*; and perhaps he has this all along in view, but speaks of it *covertly*, that he might not give offence.

 There is a *good sense* in which all these things may be applied to the Jews at large, who were favoured by our Lord's ministry and miracles. They were *enlightened* by his preaching; *tasted* of the benefits of the *heavenly gift*-the Christian religion established among them; saw many of their children and relatives *made* *partakers of the Holy Ghost; tasted the good word of God*, by the fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham; and saw the almighty *power* of God exerted, in working a great variety of *miracles*. Yet, after being convinced that never man spake as this man, and that none could do those miracles which he did, except God were with him; after having followed him in thousands, for three years, while he preached to them the Gospel of the kingdom of God; they *fell away* from all this, crucified him who, even in his sufferings as well as his resurrection, was demonstrated by miracles to be the Son of God; and then to vindicate their unparalleled wickedness, endeavoured to make him a *public example*, by reproaches and blasphemies. Therefore their state, which had received much moral cultivation from Moses, the prophets, Christ, and his apostles; and now bore nothing but the most vicious fruits, pride, unbelief, hardness of heart, contempt of God's word and ordinances, blasphemy, and rebellion; was *rejected*-reprobated, of God; was *nigh unto cursing*-about to be cast off from the Divine protection; and their city and temple were shortly to be *burnt up* by the Roman armies. Thus the apostle, under the case of *individuals*, points out the destruction that was to come upon this people *in general*, and which actually took place about *seven* years after the writing of this epistle! And this appears to be the very subject which the apostle has in view in the parallel solemn passages, Heb 10:26-31; and, viewed in this light, much of their obscurity and difficulty vanishes away.

### v. 9

 Verse 9. *But, beloved*] Here he softens what he had before said; having given them the most solemn warning against apostasy, he now encourages them to persevere, commends the good that is in them, and excites them to watchfulness and activity.

 *Better things of you*] Than that you shall resemble that *unfruitful ground* that can be improved by no tillage, and is thrown into *waste*, and is fit only for the beasts of the forests to roam in.

 *Things that accompany salvation*] ταεχομενασωτηριας. *Things* *that are suitable to a state of salvation*; you give proofs still that you have not, whatever others have done, *departed from the* *living God*. Several of your brethren have already apostatized, and the whole nation is in a state of rebellion against God; and, in consequence of their final rejection of Christ and his Gospel, are about to be finally rejected by God. *They* must meet with *destruction*; *they* have *the things that are suitable to, and* *indicative of, a state of reprobation*; the wrath of God will come upon them to the *uttermost*; but, while *they* meet with *destruction,* *you* shall meet with *salvation*. It is worthy of remark, that no *genuine Christian* perished in the destruction of Jerusalem; they all, previously to the siege by Titus, escaped to *Pella*, in Coelosyria; and it is as remarkable that not one *Jew* escaped! all either fell by the *sword*, perished by *famine*, or were led into *captivity*! According to their own imprecation, *His blood be upon* *us and our children*, God visited and avenged the innocent blood of Christ upon them and upon their posterity; and they continue to be monuments of his displeasure to the present day.

# Rewards and not salvation

## J. B. Rowell

### EXPOSITION OF HEBREWS SIX "An Age­Long Battleground" –

<http://rediscoveringthebible.com/RowellHebrewsSix.pdf>

EXPOSITION OF HEBREWS SIX "An Age­Long Battleground" by J. B. ROWELL, Th.D. Bibliotheca Sacra 94 (Jul­Sep 1937) "I know how this passage has made the heart of many a good man tremble" are the words with which Dr. R. W. Dale begins his commentary on this scripture.  He then continues, "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 storm­clouds were around  Him, and thunderings and lightnings and unearthly voices told that He was there." These  words convey some idea of the awe and hesitancy with which commentators have approached  this scripture.  Many have seemed afraid to express any opinion as to the meaning, application  or interpretation of it, while among the ablest writers all down the years who have sought to  give a faithful exegesis of this "Mount Sinai" of the New Testament, there is as wide a  difference as between Calvinism and Arminianism. There is, in fact, a danger in approaching  this.  Scripture, as many another, with a theological bias.  Both Calvinist and Arminian have  seemingly been convinced that this scripture sustains their peculiar belief. A necessary postulate in all Bible exegesis is that any interpretation is unscriptural if it conflicts with scripture.  There are three well known methods of interpretation of this scripture in  Hebrews the sixth chapter, which the writer will first state.  Following this, he will present his  own interpretation of the passage for consideration.  Each of these will receive due attention,  but with a detailed analysis of the words and context which will make clear what the author  believes to be the true exegesis.  The article will then be concluded by a statement as to the  purpose of the epistle itself as it applies to the present exposition. METHODS OF INTERPRETATION First: That those spoken of were not "born again" but were mere professors who had received  some enlightenment but had no saving faith. Matthew Henry states the case thus : "He" [the  writer of the Hebrews] "shows how far persons may go in religion, and, after all, fall away, and perish for ever." He then recounts the experiences given in verses four and five, and concludes, "Those great things are spoken here of those who may fall away: yet it is not here said of them, that they were truly converted, or that they were justified." This interpretation is accepted by  many able scholars who are sound in the faith. Second: That they were true Christians, really believers in Christ, who fell away and were lost.  Dr. R. W. Dale, in his book "The Jewish Temple and the Christian Church," says of the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, "I know not how he could have chosen expressions which more  forcibly describe the possession of a real and genuine Christian life.  Phrase is heaped upon  phrase that there may be no misapprehension." Another writer, viz., R. Govett, enters into a  close examination of the context and reaches the conclusion that the person spoken of was a  believer, and that he was "once for all enlightened" but he "died spiritually." He says, "Then the scheme which supposes the 'mere professor' unpossessed of spiritual life, is here wrecked.  The  person described was 'once for all renewed in repentance.' He was alive, but has died  spiritually. Life will not again visit him" (see, "Christ Superior to Moses," p. 158).  After  quoting Mr. Darby, who says this supposed character "had never any spiritual life," Govett  replies, "But while this escapes the difficulty of the perdition of a saint, it is widely astray from  the force, and the statements of the passage" (p. 165). Quotations, demonstrating the divergence of opinion, could be multiplied, but these are  sufficient for the purpose.  There is a grave danger, let it be repeated, in being so desirous of  safeguarding our doctrinal beliefs, that we interpret accordingly. Third: That the scripture statement "For it is impossible ... if they shall fall away" expresses the  biggest "if" in the Bible. That God's Word presents a supposed falling away as actual, showing,  if the end is to be avoided, so is the way.  However, in the Scripture under consideration, viz.,  Hebrews 6:6, the word "if" does not appear at all. The reading is     "and  και παραπεσόντας having fallen away." This being conclusive, we shall not refer again to this particular method of interpretation, or application, though the writer is willing to concede that this would afford  relief to many if this scripture could be so translated, and if this were where the particular  emphasis lay. Fourth: In presenting the following fourth method of interpretation, the writer begs leave to  say that, in the presence of the foregoing conflicting interpretations, he felt perplexed as to the true meaning of this scripture.  Being convinced that scripture is nowhere contradictory to  itself, he felt there must be an interpretation which is in perfect harmony with the rest of  scripture, and, realizing his utter incompetence to perceive the harmony apart from the  enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, he looked very definitely to the Lord for this guidance, and  as a result, and after making a detailed study of the scripture in its whole setting, he presents  this as a possible interpretation. Which interpretation, he suggests, is, That the question is not  one of salvation, but of rewards, relating, as the context shows, to 'the better things which  accompany' or are connected with salvation, viz., fruitage, or good works which are the result of a vital Christian experience.  Note the relation between salvation by grace and good works  following salvation, "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His  mercy He saved us . . . and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful (may take care) to maintain (to be forward in) good works"  (see Titus 3:5 and 8). Now let us examine the first and second of these interpretations before we present the fourth.  Just a word before we do this. The writer is convinced "That no prophecy of the scripture is of  any private interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20), or, to put it in another way, no scripture is to be  lifted out of its setting and interpreted according to the restrictions of that isolated word, or  according to preconceived ideas, but it is to be left where the Holy Spirit put it and interpreted in the light of its context.  Further, it takes all Scripture to present God's full­orbed message to  mankind, and consequently, it takes all Scripture to interpret Scripture. Now let us proceed. First Interpretation. That those spoken of were not "born again," but were mere professors who  had received some enlightenment but had no saving faith.  What saith the Scriptures? The  most restricted context for the understanding of these verses, viz., Hebrews 6:4­6, is from  Hebrews 5:11 to 6:12.  The difficulty with this method of interpretation is that the whole  passage seems to be against it.  In commenting on this Scripture, R. W. Dale, M.A., D.D.,  L.L.D., says, "I know not how he could have chosen expressions which more forcibly describe  the possession of a real and genuine Christian life. Phrase is heaped upon phrase that there  may be no misapprehension." In order to keep this paper within reasonable limitations, it will be necessary to make the  comments as brief as possible and leave the reader to enlarge on the suggestions given. Now,  to whom does this Scripture refer? Saved or unsaved? (a) Hebrews 5:11, "since ye have become dull [slow, sluggish] in hearing."  Here, deterioration is implied.  Whereas, the unsaved are "dead" (Eph. 2:1). (b) Verse 12, "ye ought to be teachers." This cannot be said of the "dead in trespasses and sins." (c) Verse 12, "have need of milk." The unsaved need life. (d) Verse 13, "a babe." The unsaved are not even born. "Ye must be born again." (e) Hebrews 6:1, "Therefore leaving the word of the beginning of the Christ," that is, as Bruce  remarks, "as a builder leaves his foundation in erecting his building," "let us be borne on unto  completeness." The unsaved have not even begun. (f) 6:1, "not laying again a foundation." The urge is to go on to maturity, not to remain at the  beginning, not to remain in the doorway of the Christian life, but to go on with the building of  the superstructure on the foundation already laid. The same word for "foundation" is used  where we read "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.  Now if any man build upon this foundation, etc." The true believer is saved because resting on  this foundation which is Jesus Christ, whereas the unsaved are not on this foundation at all. (g) 6:4, "those who were once for all enlightened." For the use of this word "once" ( ),  άπαξ compare with Hebrews 9:26, 27 and 28. The meaning and force of the word "enlightened" is  clearly given in Ephesians 1:18, where the same word is used, "The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints."  The unsaved are spoken of as being in "darkness." "What communion hath light with darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14). Note how "the god of this world  hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light . . . should shine unto them"  (2 Cor. 4:4). (h) Chapter 6, verse 4, "tasted of the heavenly gift." Dr. Marvin R. Vincent's comment is, "The  meaning is, have consciously partaken of."  The same word is used in Hebrews 2:9, where the  meaning  is unmistakable and cannot be watered down, for it says "But we see Jesus, who was  made for a little while lower than the angels, for the suffering of death, crowned with glory  and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man." This is further  emphasized in these words, "As new born babes ... if so be ye have tasted that the Lord is  gracious" (1 Peter 2:1­3). There is no mistaking the sense in which the Lord Jesus tasted death  for every man, nor the way in which "new born babes" "have tasted that the Lord is gracious,"  but what is the "Heavenly gift" of which they are said to have tasted?  Surely this is clearly  stated in many Scriptures. For example, "For God so loved the world, that he gave" . . . "The  gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (John 3:16; Romans 6:23). How can  this represent the experience of a mere professor? (i) Chapter 6, verse 4, "became partakers of the Holy Spirit." The word here for "became," or  "made" is the same as in John 1:12, "but as many as received him, to them gave he power to  become the children of God." Note the word for "partakers," μετόχους.   Drs. Liddell and Scott give the meaning as "sharing in, partaking of." The same word is translated "fellows" in  Hebrews 1:9 : "therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above  thy fellows," where the reference seems to be unmistakably to angelic beings (see Psalm 45:6,  7).  In 2 Corinthians 5:5, the Holy Spirit is spoken of as God's "earnest" to believers. As "earnest money" is the pledge of full payment, and as the risen Christ is the "firstfruits," or guarantee, of the resurrection of the redeemed, so the Holy Spirit in the believer is God's "earnest" of the full  work of grace being wrought in that heart, even as we are assured in Philippians 1:6, "He  which hath begun a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ." If these things be so, then how can this Scripture refer to one who is not a partaker of grace! (j) Chapter 6, verse 5, "And have tasted the good word of God." Our Saviour declared, "the  words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63), while the Holy  Spirit, through Paul, says "That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by  the word" (Ephesians 5:26). "The powers of the world to come." This sentence is better translated, "the works of power of  the age to come" (δυνά εις τε έλλοντος αιώνος μ ­  μ   ). The question arises, What is the world, or age, to come?  There seems no question but that this refers to the coming age of the Millennium, when the miraculous works of power which the  Lord Jesus performed, and which had been witnessed and tasted by many of those to whom  Paul was writing, will be witnessed again. Lastly, in this connection, we note in chapter 6, verse 1, the urge is to "go on unto perfection,"  that is, to "full growth," or "completeness." Surely, such an exhortation would have been out of  place were it not that these, to whom the Apostle was writing, were born­again ones and not  mere professors! The Second Interpretation. This is that these spoken of in this section of Scripture were true  Christians, having been "born again" of God's Holy Spirit, but fell away and were lost.  Dr. S. T. Bloomfield, in his Greek Testament, quotes Bishop Jeremy Taylor as commenting on the  experience given in this Scripture, together with Hebrews 10:26­29, as "a falling away from  the state of excellent things in which they had received all the present endearments of the  Gospel, —a full conviction and pardon of sins, the earnest of the Spirit, the comfort of the  promises, an antepast of heaven itself. ... It must denote absolute apostacy either unto  heathenism, or Judaism, or any other state of despising and hating Christ, as thus crucifying  Him afresh." That this Scripture does refer to those who had a real experience of God's saving grace seems  clear from the study as presented in the foregoing section dealing with the first interpretation,  but to say that they fell away into absolute apostacy is an entirely different thing.  To explain  this as illustrating, or teaching, "falling from grace" is, in the opinion of the present writer, to  immediately throw oneself into direct conflict with much Scripture. To accept and teach that a  blood­bought child of God can fall from grace is to assault the very nature, character and  sovereign purpose of God, as well as His justice and His love. Such teaching is an assault on the nature or God in that the believer is declared to be a  "partaker of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4) ; "born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh,  nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13) ; and indwelt by the Holy Spirit (John 14:16,  17). It is an assault on the character of God—His faithfulness and truthfulness, in that the life He  imparts He gives His pledge to maintain.  His promise is, "And I give unto them eternal life;  and they shall never perish, neither shall anyone pluck them out of my hand" (John 10:28­30)  "and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed out of death into life" (John 5:24). How  true is the blessed assurance, "All Jehovah's 'shalls' and 'wills'  Are firm as the everlasting hills." Further, the doctrine of "falling from grace" is an assault on the sovereign purpose of God as  set forth in Romans 8:28­30, where the believer is seen in the purpose of God in the eternity of  the past, in His foreknowledge and predestination, and in the eternity of the future sharing the  very glory of Christ (John 17:22­26). It is also an assault on the justice of God, in that God declares concerning the believer, "your  life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3), and that there is "no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus," and no separation "from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"  (Romans 8:1, 37­39). Thus, we can thank our Heavenly Father for His justice, for it is this  which preserves the child of God from a second charge: "Payment, God cannot twice demand,  First at my bleeding Surety's hand,   And then again at mine." Lastly, it is an assault on the love of God, in that God declares His love "an everlasting love"  from which nothing "shall be able to separate," for He is "able to keep you from falling, and to  present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy" (Jeremiah 31:3;  Romans 8:39; Jude 24). The writer realizes that this aspect of truth merits a much deeper  study than can be undertaken here.  However, there are some good books available on this  subject, and more is not needed for the present purpose. Fourth Interpretation. (As noted before, the third interpretation is not further discussed). Does  this scripture refer to Salvation or Rewards? From the foregoing, it will be clear to all that it is  almost impossible to apply this scripture to the question of salvation without being in conflict  with God's revealed plan of salvation. Consequently, while the writer has not come across any  suggestion of it referring to the subject of rewards, and therefore it will be new to many, he,  nevertheless, wishes to present this interpretation for the consideration of God's people. That the subjects of salvation and rewards are distinct, the one from the other, even as the  scriptures relating to them are distinct, is clear to all who have studied God's Word in this  connection.  Further, it is absolutely necessary that the scriptures relating to these distinct  subjects shall not be confused.  Salvation is the free gift of God through Jesus Christ our Lord,  whereas rewards are to be awarded at the Judgment Seat of Christ and are earned by faithful  service and good works.  Hence the admonition, "be careful to maintain good works" (Titus  3:8). Now let us notice the emphasis which this scripture, viz. Hebrews 5:11 to 6:13, lays on  fruitage resulting from growth. (1) Here is a strong message to unfruitful Christians whose lives never show forth His praise,  which is God's requirement (see 1 Peter 2:9). (2) God tells us what this scripture does refer to, viz. the "better things connected with  salvation" (       τα κρείττονα και εχό ενα σωτηρίας μ   , Hebrews 6:9). Dr. Vincent says the word, εχεσθαι, with a genitive is a common Greek idiom meaning to hold one's self to a person or  thing; hence, to be closely joined to it. . . . He is persuaded that they will give heed to all  things which attend the work of salvation and will enjoy all that attaches to a saved condition. (3) Speaking of these persons, the writer to the Hebrews states, "ye ought to be teacher" that  is, they ought to be producing fruit, and then (4) he complains about them being "inexperienced in the word of righteousness" (5:13), that  is, not putting it into practice, or, not studying to shew themselves approved unto God,  workmen that need not be ashamed (2 Timothy 2:15). (5) In chapter 6, verse 1, we read, "therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ,"  or "leaving the word of the beginning concerning Christ."  Here, the urge is for believers not to  make a stop­over at the commencement of the Christian experience, but to press on into a life  of fruitfulness. (6) This is further emphasized in the sentence which follows, "Let us be borne on to  completion," and (7) "not laying again a foundation" but to go on with the building of the superstructure. That this passage refers to works and rewards seems clear from the contrast which is made  between the "dead works" of a former experience (6:1) and the "faith toward God" which made it possible for the writer to say, "For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of  love, which ye have shewed toward His name, in that ye have ministered to [served] the  saints, and do minister [serve]" (Hebrews 6:10).  This emphasis on service, which "God is not  unrighteous to forget," is worthy of particular note in the study of rewards.  This is further  stressed in the words which follow, urging "that every one of you do shew the same  diligence . . . that ye be not slothful." Neither "diligence" nor "sloth" can be associated with  salvation, but they are certainly associated with service and rewards. This is seen in Second  Peter, the first chapter, where the partaker of the divine nature received this exhortation, "And  beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience,  godliness, brotherly kindness, love.  For if these things be in you and abound, they make you  that ye shall neither be idle ( ) nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus  αργούς Christ." DOCTRINAL IMPORTANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT'S  CHOICE OF ILLUSTRATIONS. It is always important to note the application of the illustrations used by the Holy Spirit to  enforce His message and teaching. Leading up to this section now under consideration is one  illustration, while in this section is a second illustration. Knowing that "all scripture is given by  inspiration of God" and that not any word is without purpose, we turn to study these even as  Moses turned aside to see the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed and God  spoke to him. So we look to the Lord to speak to us. The First Illustration. This is in the fourth chapter, verse two, where we read "but the word of  the report (       ) did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that  ό λόγος της ακοής heard."  We observe that this account is taken from the record of the Children of Israel as they  came to the crisis in their Wilderness experience (Numbers 13). They were the subjects of  redemption (Exodus 12). They had been brought out of the land of bondage and were now on  their way to the land of promise, the land of fruitfulness.  At Kadesh­barnea the Lord  commanded Moses to send men "that they may search the land of Canaan." The spies went  forth, and later "brought back word . . . and shewed them the fruit of the land" saying, "We  came unto the land whither thou sentest us, and surely it floweth with milk and honey : and  this is the fruit of it," but the "word of the report did not profit them, not being mixed with  faith in them that heard." In like manner, many Christians, though they are on redemption  ground, they are standing at the Kadesh­barnea crisis of their experience, they are "dull of  hearing" and still "babes," and stand in constant need of the urge to diligence in Christian  service and growth in grace; that is, to enter into the Promised Land where the riches of God's  grace flow, and where fruitfulness to the glory of God will reward the true spiritual husbandry. As Israel suffered loss by not entering into the promised possessions through unbelief, so  Christians are in danger of losing the crowns of reward through refusing to pay heed to God's  command unto diligence to "inherit the promises" (Hebrews 6:13).  Hence the need for the  exhortation, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12, 13). The Second Illustration. This the Holy Spirit uses in Hebrews 6:7, 8. Here, the application is  quite apparent. The picture is that of a piece of ground with the rains descending upon it, but  with two different results. It is the same soil which "drinketh in the rain which cometh oft  upon it." Vincent's remark on this is, ". . . the contrast is between two classes of Christians under equally favorable conditions, out of which they develop opposite results." Note these  opposite results relate to fruitage.  On the one hand, there is that which "bringeth forth herbs"  and "receiveth blessing from God."  On the other hand, there is "that which beareth thorns and  briars."  Vincent renders verse 5, "but if it (the ground that receives the rain) bear thorns and  thistles, etc." Bloomfield gives a similar rendering. In like manner there are Christians who have the same foundation and the same privileges in  Christ, and yet on the one hand there is fruitfulness as the life is yielded to the Holy Spirit who produces the "fruit of the Spirit," while on the other hand there is barrenness. It is not the  question of salvation which enters in here, but the question of works, the outgrowth of  salvation, and rewards. It is not worthy of note that the Holy Spirit associates this illustration with the scripture we are considering by the use of the conjunction "for."  Thus the illustration is given by way of  explanation of the preceding verses. Further, note the unmistakable connection with the  subjects of rewards by the use of another conjunction, "but"—"but, beloved, we are persuaded  better things of you," and, take particular notice of these words, "and things that accompany  salvation . . . for God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love." EXPLANATION OF DIFFICULT WORDS AND SENTENCES. First of all, what is the significance of the "falling away" referred to?  If we can understand this  and the other expressions used it will make it much easier to understand the whole message in this scripture.  It does not say in the original, "If they shall fall away," it says, "and having  fallen away" ( . ).  It is usually taken for granted that this means loss of eternal παραπεσόντας life. But we should never take anything for granted in the examination of scripture. Relying  upon the Holy Spirit, the only safe teacher, we should be very careful in our examination  before arriving at any conclusion. Now note, the word used here for "having fallen away" is  παραπεσόντας παραπίπτω    from   , which, according to Liddell and Scott, means "to fall  aside," "to fall away from," "to mistake," "to err," "to fall in one's way," "to deviate." Surely it is  clear that there is nothing here to demand the interpretation of a final falling away, or being  eternally lost !   If every Christian who deviates, or falls in the way is to be finally lost, then  how many will be saved?  When Peter turned aside, he certainly suffered loss, but he was not  lost. If this scripture does refer to Christian growth and service and rewards, how can this  word mean to be eternally lost?  Is it not rather a case of backsliding and a fruitless life? Notice further,    is from  , παραπίπτω πάρα beside, or with, and   ,  πίπτω to fall,  fall down. This latter word is found many times in the New Testament. It is used in relation to our Lord in  Gethsemane, where we read "And he went a little farther, and fell on his face, and prayed"  (Matthew 26:39), "he . . . fell on the ground" (Mark 14:35).  Also it is used in connection with  the sower sowing the seed, "some fell upon a rock," "some fell among thorns," "others fell on  good ground" (Luke 8:6­8). These uses but emphasize the thought that the word    παραπίπτω cannot be limited to a final falling away. On the other hand, when the Holy Spirit desires to  express the thought of the final falling away in the sense of separation from God, He used an  entirely different word, άφίστη ι μ , to place off from, depart from.  For example, "Depart from  me all ye workers of iniquity" (Luke 13:27); "and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away" (Luke 8:13); "In the latter times some shall depart from  the faith" (1 Timothy 4:1). In the second place, what is the meaning of the sentence "renew them again unto repentance"? (Hebrews 6:6).  Some stress the words "For it is impossible," and seek to make them apply to  the question of eternal life, whereas, in harmony with the rest of the passage, they refer to the  subject in hand, viz., works and rewards.  Repentance (μετάνοια) means "a change of mind,"  an "afterthought"; while the verb μετάνοεω  means "to repent," "to change one's mind, or  purpose." To "renew" unto repentance seems to suggest a former repentance, and this former  repentance is referred to in verse one where it speaks of "repentance from dead works," e. g.,  ceremonial washings, sacrifices, ordinances, etc.  If "repentance" in verse one refers to "works,"  as it so definitely states, why may not the renewal unto repentance in verse six also refer to  works. There always has been need for the exhortation "Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of  repentance," as we find Paul preaching before Agrippa, and saying "Whereupon, O king  Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision: but shewed . . . that they should  repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance" (Acts 26:19, 30). In the third place, it is necessary to consider what is meant by the latter half of verse six,  "seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame." It is  almost impossible for a Gentile Christian to understand what it meant for a Jew to become a  Christian.  It meant that he must forsake all that he once held most dear and sacred, viz., the  sacrifices and ceremonies according to the Levitical law.  He failed to realize that all the  sacrifices were but types and shadows, of which Christ was the fulfillment and reality, which  aspect of truth the writer to the Hebrews goes into very fully in the succeeding chapters of the  epistle.  As a consequence, many Christian Jews were seduced and persuaded to go back to the former life of "dead works," sacrifices, etc., thinking they could still be Christians while  participating in the old Judaistic religion.  They failed to grasp the truth that after Christ had  come and finished the work of redemption, every sacrifice was a crucifying afresh of the Son of God.  Hence the writer presents very clearly and forcibly the precious fact that the sacrifices of  Jesus was "once for all . . . for by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are  sanctified" (Hebrews 10).  However, in going back to the old sacrifices, they had fallen away  from the only true foundation for Christian living, and as long as their minds were dominated  by the traditions of the fathers, it was impossible to renew them unto repentance, or change of mind toward Christ and a life to "shew forth His praise," "for other foundation can no man lay  than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). Further, there is another aspect of this phase of the subject which is often lost sight of by  Christians today. It is this.  A Christian is either "growing in grace" or he is receding from a  former spiritual standard of experience, that is, he is backsliding.  A fruitless life is a life  refusing to shew forth His praise, a denying to Christ His rightful place of preeminence.  Consequently, such a life represents Christianity to the world as powerless, lifeless, and, as far  as that testimony is concerned, Christ is not a living reality but a dead Christ.  Fruitless living  represents Christianity as lifeless and Christ ineffective and unreal, in the same way that "faith  without works is dead" and cannot convince an unbelieving world.  Our lives either crown or  crucify  Christ.  If Christ is not Lord of all, He is not Lord at all, and where He is not  preeminent, there is contempt.  There is no neutrality in this tremendous issue.  Our Lord  declared, "He that is not with Me is against Me." We are either with Christ as a life of  fruitfulness testifies to the reality of our salvation and shows forth His praise, or we are against Christ  as a life of barrenness denies Him.  To the extent that a Christian is unyielded to the  Holy Spirit to produce in him the fruit, in life and deed, which will glorify God, to that extent  he refuses to crown Christ as Lord and says "Away with Him, crucify Him." If "we are the only  Bible a careless world will read," then the world will only see Christ as He is seen in us, and, is  it not true, He is seen either as dead and ineffective, or living and powerful—crucified or  crowned.  A true Christian is not only a saved sinner but he is to be a laborer "together with  God" (1 Cor. 3:9), "for we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works,  which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). WHAT ARE THE MEANINGS OF "REJECTED,"  "CURSING," "BURNED"? Verse 8 reads, "But that which beareth thorns and briars is rejected, and nigh unto cursing;  whose end is to be burned." (1) The word "rejected" is αδόκι ος δόκι ος μ . The word  μ  means  "approved" as in 2 Timothy 2:15, "Study to shew thyself approved unto God a workman that  needeth not to be ashamed" (see also 1 Cor. 11:9; and 2 Cor. 13:7). The word is used in  connection with works and not salvation.  Since δόκι ος μ  means approved, αδόκι ος μ  means  disapproved.  It is used in a chapter where the apostle Paul is speaking of service and rewards,  where it is unfortunately translated "castaway" (1 Corinthians 9:27). (2) "Nigh unto cursing."   This emphasizes the thought of being disapproved as a fruitless, profitless life. Bloomfield, in  his Greek Testament, gives the meaning as "is near being utterly rejected," and adds further,  "land so hopelessly unproductive was popularly called cursed land." (3) "Whose end is to be  burned" (verse 8).  Bloomfield's comment on this is, "we have here alluded to a process  common in the East,—and found more or less everywhere—by which foul land is ameliorated  by the thorns and thistles being pared off at the roots, and heaped and burned ; which both  cleans and manures the soil."  There is a Scripture, however, which seems to throw all the light we need on this.  It is the great chapter dealing with Christian service and the rewards, and  that is 1 Corinthians 3.  In this chapter Christians are spoken of as "God's fellow workers,"  "God's husbandry," who are to build upon the one foundation "Which is Jesus Christ." Then  comes this significant revelation regarding the believer being tested at the Judgment Seat of  Christ, not for or with regard to his salvation, but concerning his life's work: "Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is.  If any man's work abide which he hath built  thereupon, he shall receive a reward.  If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss:  but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire."  A clearer commentary on this subject could  not be asked for than that which Scripture itself affords.  The same thought is in view in John  15:6, where our Lord is dealing with fruit­bearing.  He says, "If a man abide not in Me, he is  cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and  they are burned."  The whole context shows that our Lord was not dealing with the question of salvation, but with the believer in his capacity "as a branch," as to his fruit­bearing—"Herein is  My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit." THE TWO "ENDS" IN VIEW (1) "Diligence unto the end"; and (2) "whose end is to be burned." The urge to "diligence unto  the end" has certainly to do with service and rewards. Diligence neither secures nor aids our  salvation.  Salvation is all of grace (Ephesians 2:8). Diligence, however, by the enabling of God, does turn idleness into zeal for God's glory, and barrenness into fruitfulness.  If then, these two "ends" are before us by way of contrast, is it not clear that the other "end," viz., "Whose end is  to be burned," has also to do with the question of service and rewards! WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WORD "IMITATORS"? Hebrews 6, verse 12, reads "That ye be not slothful, but followers (μ μι ητάι, imitators) of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises." In the light of salvation being by  sovereign grace, it is simply impossible to make such a Scripture as this apply to the question  of salvation, but it is as clear as day that it does refer to "Things that accompany salvation."  Nowhere in the Word of God is anyone asked to imitate any man in order to be saved.  Yet, in  this Scripture, those who have overcome and gained the inheritance are held up to our view in order to exemplify what the grace of God makes possible "through faith and longsuffering."  Thus the exhortation is made to every believer, "That ye be not sluggish, but imitators of  them." What then are our conclusions regarding the Epistle to the Hebrews and this section in  particular? The epistle was undoubtedly written to Hebrew Christians who were still  surrounded by all the attractions of the Temple worship. They were surrounded by influences  which were calculated to seduce them to go back to the former life of "dead works" —the  temple sacrifices and ceremonial—to sacrifices which would be crucifying the Son of God  afresh.  Hence we see the reason for the exhortation to steadfastness which runs through the  epistle. In Meyer's commentary, we have this comment: "The Epistle to the Hebrews was occasioned by the danger to which the Christians in Palestine, particularly in Jerusalem, were exposed, of  renouncing again their faith in Christ, and wholly falling back again into Judaism (comp,  specially 6:4­6, 10:26ff).  This danger had become a very pressing one, inasmuch as many had  already as a matter of fact ceased to frequent the Christian assemblies (10:25).  The epistle  accordingly aims, by the unfolding on every side of the sublimity of the Christian revelation as  the perfect and archetypal, above that of the old Testament as the merely preparatory and  typical, as well as by setting forth the terrible consequences of an apostacy, to warn against  such falling away, and to animate to a faithful perseverance in the Christian course." To offset the danger in the temptation to return to the temple sacrifices, the writer of the  epistle, by the Holy Spirit, reveals to them the glory of the New Testament with Jesus as the  great High Priest : he seeks to lead them into the deep things of God to which the Old  Covenant, with all its types, shadows and sacrifices, was ever leading; and so he urges them to  advance beyond the food for babes for the meat of the Gospel, the fuller revelation, realizing  that the fuller the knowledge of Christ, the less danger there would be of spiritual decline. During the transition period from the dispensation of law to the dispensation of grace from  Judaism to the Church, it was very difficult for believing Jews to accept teaching which linked  Jew and Gentile in one body, in that it proclaimed, "There is neither Jew nor Greek . . . for ye  are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28); "For He is our peace, who hath made both one,  and hath broken down the middle wall of partition: having abolished in his flesh the enmity,  even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one  new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the  cross . . . for through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father" (Ephesians 2:14­ 18).  It seemed a strange experience for these Christian Jews to be associated with Gentiles  who had never been subject to the law of Moses, and at the same time to worship the Messiah  of Whom Moses and the Prophets spoke, but apart from the law of Moses. The Hebrew Christians were suffering persecution at the hands of Ananias the high priest who  regarded them as transgressors of the law.  The comment by Jamieson, Fausset and Brown is  to the point where they say, "he [the writer to the Hebrews] warns them of the danger of  apostacy, to which Jewish converts were tempted, when they saw Christians persecuted, whilst Judaism was tolerated by the Roman authorities." Some were stoned to death, others had their belongings confiscated while they themselves were banished from the holy places, being  excluded from worshipping in the temple and treated as unclean. What sorer trial could there  be for a Jew !  He was banished from Messiah's people while seeking to be true to Christ the  Messiah, and thus ranked among the "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel." The writer enters into the heart­breaking situation and unfolds the greater glory of the New  Covenant.  He deals with the subject of their relationship to Israel, telling them that they are  the true Israel, and that their God is the God of their fathers; and that, whereas they had  Moses the faithful servant, now they have Christ, God's Anointed, as the Lord and Master of  the house (Hebrews 3:1­6).  They have, in fact, passed from the shadows to the reality for  which all Israel had longed and waited.  Jesus had been rejected by Israel, He had passed  through humiliation and died the ignominious death of the cross and yet it was in His name  that the early Church assembled.  It is well nigh impossible for us to conceive just what it  meant to a Jew to leave the pomp, the splendour, and the ancient ritual of his fathers to  become associated with the followers of the despised Nazarene.  Only as such a Jew believed  in Jesus Christ gloriously risen from among the dead and exalted to the right hand of God, and that in Him the types and teaching of the Mosaic dispensation were abundantly fulfilled—only  in this way could he be content to remain with the contemned believers in Jesus. This was one of the leading purposes in the writing of this epistle.  Frequent reference is made  to the leaders of Israel, and to circumstances and experiences which no Hebrew could slight or question.  Here they were reminded of Israel's bondage in Egypt.  Here are seen, in all their  meaningful associations, Abraham, Melchisedec, Moses, Joshua and David.  Here, too, are seen the tabernacle with its sacred furniture, the Levitical priesthood, the order of Aaron and the  daily sacrifices.  And all this in order to show that the elaborate ceremonies and manifold  sacrifices were but "a shadow of good things to come," and that "the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law . . . for the law made nothing perfect, but  the bringing in of a better hope. . . . And they truly were many priests, because they were not  suffered to continue by reason of death: But this man, because he continueth ever, hath an  unchangeable [intransmissible] priesthood.  Wherefore he is able also to save them to the  uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them"  (see Hebrews 7).  In this way the Hebrew Christian was led to see that the Levitical sacrifices  were not discredited but rather superseded.  "And every priest standeth daily ministering and  offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; But this man, after he  had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God. . . . For by one  offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified" (Hebrew 10:10­14).  And, rather  than being excluded from the true worship, the wondering Hebrew believer was assured that he could now enter into the very holy of holies: "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter  into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for  us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; and having an high priest over the house of God;  Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (Hebrews 10:19­22). It was to these same Hebrew Christians, and during the same period of transition, that the  words in this section (Hebrews 5:11 to 6:12), claiming our attention in this thesis, were  addressed.  And, as we have seen, the Scripture itself seems to conclusively prohibit their  application either to believers falling away into a final apostacy, or to professors who received  a great measure of enlightenment but were never regenerated by the Holy Spirit.  Consequently, the only application possible seems to be that they were true Christians, born  again, but "babes" in the faith, but on account of the proximity of the attractions of the temple  worship, and also the generations of associations, they were strongly tempted to step aside  from the revelation in Christ and go back to participate in the Judaistic sacrifices and  ordinances instead of living in the enjoyment of "boldness to enter into the holiest," growing in grace and making progress in the "things that accompany salvation."  Hence, the passage  refers, not to the question of salvation, but rather to the question of service and rewards which are subsequent to salvation—to that life, following the experience of having passed from death unto life, wherein the believer is exhorted to "grow in grace" and to "be careful to maintain  good works"—a "work and labour of love," showing "diligence to the full assurance of hope  unto the end" (Heb. 6:10).