

# HEBREWS 6:4-6, CAN CHRISTIANS LOSE THEIR SALVATION

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*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**, 5 and have **tasted the goodness of the word of God** and the **powers of the age to come**, 6 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. (Hebrews 6:4-6 ESV)[1]*

This is clearly the most difficult passage concerning the Preservation of the Saints, so much commentary will be provided to help understand this passage of Scripture.

## COMMENTARIES

The **ESV Study Bible** explains: [2]

Heb. 6:4-8 This passage has been subject to substantially different interpretations. The central debate concerns whether the descriptions of vv. 4-5 (e.g., “enlightened,” “tasted the heavenly gift,” “shared in the Holy Spirit,” “tasted of the goodness of the word of God”) depict people who were once true Christians. (1) Some argue these phrases do describe true Christians, implying that Christians can “fall away” and lose their salvation (cf. note on 3:14, however, indicating a fundamental difficulty with this view). Nonetheless, most who advocate this view hold that some who backslide can still return to Christian faith, thus limiting 6:4-6 to hardened cases of apostasy in which it is “impossible ... to restore them again to repentance” (vv. 4, 6). (2) Most argue, however, that although these people may have participated fully in the Christian covenantal community (where they experienced enlightened instruction in the Word of God, where they saw public repentance occur, and where the Holy Spirit was at work in powerful ways), when such people do “fall away” it is clear that they are not true Christians because they have not made a true, saving response to the gospel, resulting in genuine faith, love, and perseverance (vv. 9-12). Significantly, they are like land that received much rain but bore no good fruit, only “thorns and thistles” (v. 8). They may have participated outwardly in the Christian community and they even may have shared in the blessings of Christian fellowship; but, like the seed that fell on rocky ground in the parable of the sower, “they have no root” (Mark 4:17) and they “fall away” when faced with persecution. (3) Another view is that the warnings are addressed to true believers, and though they will never completely fall away, the warnings are still the means that God uses to challenge them to persevere in their faith and so to preserve those whom the Lord has chosen. (4) A fourth view is that the “falling away” described in Heb. 6:6 has to do with loss of heavenly rewards. In any case, though the author recognizes that there may be a few in the congregation who fit the description of vv. 4-8, in general he does not think it to be true as a whole of the congregation to which he is writing, for he says, “yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation” (v. 9).

John MacArthur explains in the **ESV MacArthur Bible**: [3]

**Heb. 6:4 enlightened.** They had received instruction in biblical truth, which was accompanied by intellectual perception. Understanding the gospel is not the equivalent of regeneration (cf. 10:26, 32). In John 1:9 it is clear that enlightening is not the equivalent of salvation. Cf. Heb. 10:29. tasted the heavenly gift. Tasting in the figurative sense in the NT refers to consciously experiencing something (cf. 2:9). The experience might be momentary or continuing. Christ's "tasting" of death (2:9) was obviously momentary and not continuing or permanent. All men experience the goodness of God, but that does not mean they are all saved (cf. Matt. 5:45; Acts 17:25). Many Jews, during the Lord's earthly ministry, experienced the blessings from heaven he brought—in healings and deliverance from demons, as well as eating the food he created miraculously (John 6). Whether the gift refers to Christ (cf. John 6:51; 2 Cor. 9:15) or to the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2:38; 1 Pet. 1:12), experiencing either one was not the equivalent of salvation (cf. John 16:8; Acts 7:51). shared in the Holy Spirit. See notes on Heb. 2:4. Even though the concept of partaking is used in 3:1; 3:14; and 12:8 of a relationship that believers have, the context must be the final determining factor. This context in 6:4–6 seems to preclude a reference to true believers. It could be a reference to their participation, as noted above, in the miraculous ministry of Jesus, who was empowered by the Spirit (see notes on Matt. 12:18–32; cf. Luke 4:14, 18), or in the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8), which obviously can be resisted without experiencing salvation (cf. Acts 7:51).

**Heb. 6:5 tasted.** See note on v. 4. This has an amazing correspondence to what was described in 2:1–4 (see notes there). Like Simon Magus (Acts 8:9–24), these Hebrews had not yet been regenerated in spite of all they had heard and seen (cf. Matt. 13:3–9; John 6:60–66). They were repeating the sins of those who died in the wilderness after seeing the miracles performed through Moses and Aaron and hearing the voice of God at Sinai.

**Heb. 6:6 fallen away.** This Greek term occurs only here in the NT. In the Lxx, it was used to translate terms for severe unfaithfulness and apostasy (cf. Ezek. 14:13; 18:24; 20:27). It is equivalent to the apostasy in Heb. 3:12. The seriousness of this unfaithfulness is seen in the severe description of rejection within this verse: they re-crucify Christ and treat him contemptuously (see also the strong descriptions in 10:29). Those who sinned against Christ in such a way had no hope of restoration or forgiveness (cf. 2:2–3; 10:26–27; 12:25). The reason is that they had rejected him with full knowledge and conscious experience (as described in the features of 6:5–6). With full revelation they rejected the truth, concluding the opposite of the truth about Christ, and thus had no hope of being saved. They can never have more knowledge than they had when they rejected it. They have concluded that Jesus should have been crucified, and they stand with his enemies. There is no possibility of these verses referring to losing salvation. Many Scripture passages make unmistakably clear that salvation is eternal (cf. John 10:27–29; Rom. 8:35, 38, 39; Phil. 1:6; 1 Pet. 1:4–5). Those who want to make this verse mean that believers can lose salvation will have to admit that it would then also say that one could never get it back again. See Introduction: Interpretive Challenges.

The **ESV Reformation Study Bible** says: [\[4\]](#)

**6:4 once been enlightened.** That is, had the knowledge of God disclosed in the gospel message (10:26; John 1:9; 2 Cor. 4:4–6) and publicly confessed in baptism. In early Christian writings, conversion and baptism were sometimes termed "enlightenment." The Greek word for "once" is prominent in Hebrews. It is used in connection with the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ in 10:2, 10.

**tasted the heavenly gift.** Some see here a reference to participation in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Or the phrase could be paired with "enlightened" as a broad description of apparent conversion.

**shared in the Holy Spirit.** They had some experience with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but it is not necessary to conclude that regeneration is specifically intended.

**6:5 powers of the age to come.** Most obviously, the signs and wonders that accompanied the introduction of the gospel (2:4 note).

**6:6 if they then fall away.** There is a kind of falling away that is irreversible (1 John 5:16). Christian salvation is final (10:4), and the decision to reject it, if made at a certain level, cannot be reversed. According to 1 John 2:19, anyone who makes such a decision was not really a member of the household of faith, although they may have seemed to be. Judas Iscariot is the clearest example of someone who participated in the coming of the kingdom, but did not enter it (Matt. 26:47–49; cf. Matt. 7:21–23). This warning is not to encourage speculation about whether others are irretrievably lost, but urges us to cling closely to the Savior ourselves. See "The Unpardonable Sin" at Mark 3:29.

**crucifying once again the Son of God.** By renouncing their faith in Christ they declare that Christ's cross is not a holy sacrifice for others' sins, but the deserved execution of a guilty criminal (10:29). Such apostates have returned to a point where the Cross does nothing but condemn them as accomplices in murder (Acts 18:5, 6).

There is an analogy between the once-for-all character of Christ's sacrifice for sin and the believer's symbolic participation in that crucifixion through baptism (v. 4 note). Christ's sacrificial death cannot be repeated. In the same way, the believer's participation in His death, sealed by baptism (Rom. 6:3, 4; Col. 2:12), cannot be withdrawn and then repeated.

**contempt.** The apostasy described in ch. 6 is not a matter of private, internal doubt. It is the forceful, complete, and public rejection of a faith once confessed. As such, it has bad effects for others as well as for the apostate (12:15).

The **HCSB Study Bible** says the following on Hebrews chapter 6 in general: [5]

6:4-20 Verses 6-9 have been the subject of much debate. There are several possible interpretations regarding the author's intentions and the identity of those **who have fallen away**. First, some say those who had "fallen away" were genuine Christians who had forsaken Jesus and reverted to Judaism. A second view says they were hearers who had understood the gospel but had not become true believers. A third interpretation identifies the **things connected with salvation** as sanctification rather than justification. A fourth interpretation holds that the writer is speaking about apostasy as a possibility rather than a reality.

The first interpretation neglects the author's claim that he was speaking in a rhetorical way and was **confident of the better things** regarding his readers. The second interpretation must overcome the language of conversion ( **those who were once enlightened, who tasted the heavenly gift, became companions with the Holy Spirit, and who tasted God's good word and the powers of the coming age**). These phrases indicate something beyond a mere hearing of the gospel. The third interpretation does not adequately deal with the fact that the apostate cannot renew his repentance once he has chosen the way of faithlessness.

Because of problems with the first three views, the fourth interpretation—that the author was speaking of an unfulfilled possibility rather than a concrete reality—seems most acceptable. Indeed, he used the warning against apostasy as a rhetorical means to call his readers to **demonstrate the same diligence** they had shown before. He was confident of something better than apostasy in their lives because he saw their prior love for Christ and faithful service in His name. The author was not detailing a doctrine of apostasy; he was calling his readers to progress toward maturity. Every succeeding statement promotes this goal. Like Abraham, who obtained the promise of God **after waiting patiently**, the readers should **seize the hope** before them because God has **guaranteed** His promise with an **oath**. And because Jesus has entered the **inner sanctuary** of God's presence, the Christian has a sure and firm **anchor** for the soul. There is not a hint of wavering in the author's voice about either God's will or the final outcome for his "dear friends."

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This content is taken from [this document](#)

[1] A more in-depth examination is available in John Gill's The Cause of God and Truth, section 50. See "[Resources](#)."

<http://www.gotquestions.org/Hebrews-6.html>

[2] ESV Study Bible, 2008 (Crossway). Taken from the Online Version at [www.esvbible.org](http://www.esvbible.org)

[3] John MacArthur, The MacArthur Study Bible 2010, Crossway. Taken from the online version at [www.esvbible.org](http://www.esvbible.org)

[4] R.C. Sproul, The Reformation Study Bible ESV, Ligonier Ministries. Taken from the free online version at [BibleGateway](http://BibleGateway.com)

[5] HCSB (Holman Christian Standard Bible®) Study Bible 2010, Holman Bible Publishers. Taken from the online version at [www.mystudybible.com](http://www.mystudybible.com)