

Impossible to renew to repentance?

⁴For it is impossible to renew again to repentance those who were once-for-ever enlightened, and so have experienced the heavenly gift, who were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and who experienced the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶and yet they then fell by the wayside. How shall we interpret these verses?

(i) Nothing to do with losing our status as 'saved' people

(i) **They certainly have nothing to do with losing our status as 'saved' people.** New birth and justification are not reversible. There is no reference here to 'falling away' in that sense. Verse 10 explains: *For God is not so unjust as to overlook your work...* Surely no Bible-believing Christian thinks we are saved by how good we are, and that God in his justice will save us because of our good works! Works are connected not with justification or new birth but with reward or inheritance, one of the main themes of Hebrews.

(ii) But loss of maturity is possible

(ii) **It is the possible loss of maturity that is the theme of the passage.** The passage is dealing with reaching perfection or maturity. It involves inheriting the promises and enjoying the rewards of God. It is along this line of approach that we must follow the thought in Hebrews 6:4-6. God rewards **works** of persistent faith (as Hebrews 10:35 says – 'Your confidence...has a great reward'). It is this that might possibly be lost as the result of rebellion and spiritual hardness.

(iii) Being "Enlightened is less than being saved" – Untrue the writer is certainly talking about true Christians

(iii) **One other view of this passage I must reject decisively** and that is the idea that being 'enlightened'^{□1} is less than being 'saved'. The writer is not saying that if an enlightened-but-unsaved person falls by the wayside he cannot be restored. Our author gives no hint that he does not regard these people as true Christians. He knows they are holy brothers and sisters, partakers of a heavenly calling, people who have been persecuted for their faith in Christ. Read the description of the people in 10:32-39, a description of what they were like after they had been enlightened. Their faith is mentioned in the description of those who 'fell'. For 'confidence'^{□2} is the writer's term for assured faith. They had faith; the writer asks them not to cast it aside but hold to it such that they are richly rewarded^{□3}. These people were certainly Christian people.

□1 6:4

□2 10:35

□3 10:35

• No one has ever found a way of living with that approach!

There is another objection to this third approach. No one has ever found a way of living with it! The great Asahel Nettleton said, 'The most I have ventured to say respecting myself is, that I think it possible I may get to heaven'.¹ He took the view of Hebrews 6 that I am criticizing. Maybe (he thought) he was only enlightened! But surely we are meant to have more assurance of salvation than that!

• The second approach works

It is the second approach we must explore. The writer's point is this. There is a danger for **Christians** to avoid. It is possible to be so resistant to spiritual growth that God decides to leave us static and we cease to make further progress. God is slow to anger, but he does not ignore hardness of heart and unbelief for ever. The important thing is to be able to hear God's voice. If you can respond when God rebukes you, then you have not reached spiritual deafness. As long as God can speak to you, then you are able to respond to what he says and be renewed to repentance and you can make spiritual progress.

Christian conversion

He describes Christian conversion. The people he has in mind are certainly Christian people. 'Once enlightened' must refer to Christian conversion (it is similar to Ephesians 1:18; Hebrews 10:26, 32). Outside of Hebrews the best parallel is 2 Corinthians 4:4-6. Christian conversion happens when the light of the gospel shines in our heart to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. In Hebrews 6:4,

• Once for ever

the word 'once' – meaning 'once for ever', 'once for all time' – points to their one-and-only time of conversion to Christ.

• *Contrast with a different group of people*

We may note that the writer is speaking here of Christians, but they are Christians different from the readers. 'It is impossible for those...' – those people distinct from the ones reading his letter, those who have 'forsaken the assembling of themselves together'¹. The writer is not writing to them; he is writing about them, and warning his friends not to follow the way they have gone. Those people were saved but became rebellious. Unlike them, we need to press on to maturity and inheritance.

1 10:25

• *'Tasting the heavenly gift'*

'Tasting the heavenly gift' refers to the blessings of forgiveness, new birth, sanctification and cleansing by the Holy Spirit.

• *'Partakers of the Holy Spirit'*

These people also 'were made partakers of the Holy Spirit'¹. Once again the word he uses (*metochous*) is a strong word and refers to full Christian experience. The Christian is 'born again' by the Holy Spirit. He or she may be 'sealed' with the Holy Spirit. We are given gifts of the Holy Spirit. Our writer has all of this in mind.

1 6:4

• *The goodness of the God's word*

These people also 'experienced the goodness of the word of God'. God's gospel message is good. God promises to work all things together for good in the life of the person who loves God. The Christian gets to experience this 'goodness' of the gospel-message of God. It is God's goodness to us that ought to encourage us to move on to full maturity. It is because we have experienced God's goodness that rebellion and spiritual deafness are so serious.

• *Experienced... the powers of the age to come*

These people also 'experienced...the powers of the age to come'¹. There is a logical order in these phrases describing the Christian. First we see Jesus with the eye of faith; we have the enlightenment of the gospel. Then we actually experience Jesus as God's gift to us. Thirdly, salvation is sealed to us by the Holy Spirit. Then we discover God's goodness to us, perhaps over many years. Then the gifts and blessings of the Spirit are 'powers of the age to come'. They are flashes of glory from the heavenly world to which we are travelling. The Holy Spirit gives us a foretaste of glory. We get to experience even now something of the praise of God, something of the direct presence of God, a foretaste of God's rewards, a foretaste of the music and joys of heaven, the fellowship and love of heaven. In all of this we have 'powers', anointing, lubrication, abilities that come from heaven, and we are able to serve God.

1 6:5

• *Great responsibility ...press on*

Christian conversion is wonderful! But then the privilege of experiencing all of these things puts us in a position of great responsibility. We must press on to maturity – by hearing God's voice and getting to inherit his promises.

Note ¹ B. Tyler and A.A. Bennett, *The Life and Labours of Asahel Nettleton* (repr. Banner of Truth, 1975), p. 30.



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