

CAN A GENUINE BELIEVER IN CHRIST LOSE SALVATION?
AN EXPOSITION PAPER ON HEBREWS 6:4-8

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Introduction

Hebrews 6:4-8 is one of the most controversial and disputed passages in the New Testament¹. Much ink has been spilled in an attempt to resolve the tension this passage causes, especially when trying to reconcile it with the New Testament theology of unconditional eternal security—the belief that once a person is genuinely saved, they cannot lose their salvation. Scholars debate whether this passage suggests that believers can fall away from faith permanently, which appears to challenge doctrines asserting that salvation cannot be lost. These conflicting interpretations are the source of ongoing discussion and disagreement among theologians.

RT France² lays out three views put forward by different scholars in their attempt to reconcile the dilemma in Hebrews 6:4-8. First, some argue that the people described in Hebrews 6 were interested people who had tested Christianity but were not genuine believers; a second view holds that the author of Hebrews referred to a spiritual shipwreck which is not terminal (along the same lines, Zane Hodges describes this as potential loss of rewards but not loss of salvation (1 Corinthians 9:27)).³ Third, other scholars (especially Charles Ryrie) posit that the author of Hebrews is hypothetically describing a scenario that could never happen. While all the views mentioned above make a strong case, this paper's position is that the author is referring to interested people who were not genuine believers. Therefore, this paper will study the passage at hand to substantiate the view taken here.

To make a valid contribution to the debate, one must lay aside theological presuppositions and faithfully approach the passage from a Biblical theology perspective. As a rule of thumb, Biblical theology must precede systematic theology before one claims the capacity to theologize.⁴ With that in mind, this paper will conclude based on the exegesis of the passage and strive to avoid forcing the passage to mean something other than the author's intended meaning. Due to the limited size of this paper, a brief exegetical work will focus on the following: a survey of the overall structure, a brief study for some keywords, a brief overview of the syntax and meaning of the four participial clauses in verse 4–5 and the meaning of the two participial clauses following the infinitive in verse 6. Therefore, this paper will strive to faithfully exegete the passage and evaluate various commentators' views to make an educated conclusion.

¹ George Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 216.

² R. T. France, “Hebrews,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Hebrews–Revelation (Revised Edition)*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, vol. 13 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 84–85.

³ Zane C. Hodges, “Hebrews,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 794.

⁴ David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 344–345.

The overall structure of the epistle

The Epistle of Hebrews is structured as a sermon intended to encourage Jewish Christians facing persecution and considering a return to their former traditions.⁵ The author presents Christ as superior to: prophets (1:1-3), angels (1:4-2:18), Moses and Joshua (3:1-4:13), Old Testament priesthood and covenant (4:14-10:18), and then the author concludes the sermon with practical application to living in light of the faith in Christ (10:19-13:25).⁶ The author alternates between exalting Christ and issuing warnings to motivate the audience to respond to Christ's superiority and face persecution courageously. Although the structure is not linear, and it is hard to determine exact section breaks, the flow of the argument is accessible.⁷

Hebrews 6:4-8 is the third of at least five significant warning passages (2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:26-31; 12:25-29), focusing on the danger of falling away. It is situated within a section (4:14-10:8) that expounds on Christ's superiority over Old Testament priests, sacrifices, and covenant. This passage strikingly describes the impossibility of restoring to repentance those who have experienced enlightenment, tasted the heavenly gift, become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the good word and powers of the age to come. The central debate surrounding 6:4-8 concerns whether the descriptions in verses 4-5 refer to genuine believers or non-believers. A close analysis of the participial clauses is crucial to understanding the author's intended audience.

A brief word study of keywords in the participial clauses of verses 4-5

Verses 4-5 consist of a chain of four parallel participles in the masculine gender, accusative case, and plural in number. All five function as the direct objects of the infinitive “to renew again.”⁸ First, “..ἅπαξ φωτισθέντας...” meaning “...have once been *enlightened*...”. The Greek word “φωτίζω” means “to give light to, function as the source of light” and is used figuratively to mean making known about transcendent matters.⁹ Guthrie¹⁰ argues that the participial clause “have once been enlightened” refers to, as used in Hebrews 10:32, initial exposure to the gospel or early instruction in Christian doctrine. McKnight posits that the term enlightened regularly signified conversion in early Christian literature.¹¹ Since it's hard to conclude from scripture that enlightened means conversion, it's best to take it that the author meant people who have had an exposure to the Christian faith.

Second, “γευσάμενους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου” meaning “...who have *tested* of the heavenly gift...” The Greek word “γεύομαι” means “to experience something cognitively or emotionally.”¹² Guthrie rejects the idea that “γεύομαι” means “to have tried but not fully partaken of” or “partaking of the Eucharist”; he argues that this word is also used in Hebrews 2:9 and

⁵ Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary, 19-20.

⁶ France, “Hebrews,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Hebrews–Revelation*, 36.

⁷ Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary, 27; France, “Hebrews,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Hebrews–Revelation*, 35.

⁸ Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary, 347.

⁹ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1074.

¹⁰ Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary, 218.

¹¹ McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions” *Trinity Journal*, 13NS (1992), 45-46.

¹² Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 195.

means “to experience something.”¹³ McKnight concurs with the definition but goes further to see a conversion experience implied.¹⁴ To conclude that the clause “tasted of the heavenly gift” means conversion is to read too much into the text. It could be said of both believers and non-believers without

Furthermore, “καὶ μετόχους γενηθέντας πνεύματος ἁγίου” meaning “...have shared in the Holy Spirit...” For Osborne, the clause “γενηθέντας πνεύματος ἁγίου” means participating fully in the gift of the Spirit.¹⁵ “The word has a broad semantic range and generally seems to mean ‘to have a close association with’ or ‘participate in.’”¹⁶ One might argue that this phrase is best suited for depicting genuine believers. However, it would be quick to conclude, and hence the necessity to study other clauses.

Finally, “καλὸν γευσάμενους θεοῦ ῥῆμα δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος” meaning “and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come”. Moffat also argues that the participle καλὸν γευσάμενους θεοῦ ῥῆμα means “have experienced how good the gospel is.”¹⁷ The Greek “γευσάμενους” “to taste” used in the second clause is repeated in this fourth clause and carries the same meaning as in the second clause above. It means people who have experienced the goodness of God’s word and the power of the age to come.

Furthermore, the Greek word “παραπεσόντας” in verse 6, is very crucial to determine what is meant by “impossible to be restored to repentance.” This word means “to fail to follow through on a commitment”, and it is translated as “*fall away, commit apostasy*.”¹⁸

While verses 4-5 may seem to suggest believers, the described experiences—enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, shared in the Holy Spirit, tasted God's word and the age to come—could also apply to unbelievers like Judas Iscariot. Given that God's kingdom and miracles have been evident to all throughout history, these descriptors alone do not definitively identify the author's intended audience as either Christian or non-Christian. Much more probing is necessary.

Verse 6 clarifies that restoring to repentance is impossible for those who fall away (apostates) after having the aforementioned experiences. If this refers to believers, it suggests they can renounce faith and be unable to repent. Osborne argues this apostasy might be the unpardonable sin (blaspheming the Holy Spirit, Mark 3:28-30).¹⁹ This contrasts with the statements found in John 6:37-40, where Jesus indicates that no believer will be lost, and in 1 Peter 1:5, which refers to believers being protected through faith for the salvation to be revealed. This tension makes the passage complex, fueling scholarly debate and justifying further contextual inquiry.

Furthermore, verse 9 states, “Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.” The author switches to the second person plural pronoun in verse 9 (“in your case..”) from the third person plural pronouns in verse 4 (“in the case of those”). This is a clear indication of two kinds of people in the author’s audience. For those who assert that the author has in mind one audience of genuine believers, they should carefully consider their interpretation of verse 9. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that Hebrews 6:4-8 does not support the loss of salvation. The author is alerting his audience that some people will fall away, and it will be impossible to bring them back to repentance.

¹³ Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary, 218.

¹⁴ McKnight, *Trinity Journal*, 13NS (1992), 46-47.

¹⁵ Osborne, *A Classical Arminian View*, 113.

¹⁶ George Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary, 219.

¹⁷ James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1924), 78.

¹⁸ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* BDAG, 770.

¹⁹ Osborne, “A Classical Arminian View,” in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, 114.

To further substantiate the view taken in this paper, we will delve into an analysis of theological systems that have historically grappled with the complexities of this passage. This exploration will provide a richer understanding of the diverse interpretations and the reasoning behind them, offering valuable context for our own conclusions.

Scholarly interpretations of Hebrews 6:4-8

The classical Arminian view

The classical Arminian view posits that Hebrews 6:4-5 describe a believer's experience, interpreting the passage as a warning against renouncing faith, an unpardonable sin. They argue these descriptions signify genuine conversion (2 Corinthians 4:3-6)²⁰ and cannot refer to non-Christians or partial heavenly gifts.²¹ This perspective is supported by warnings in other Hebrews passages (10:26-31, 12:15-17)²² and sees the audience of 6:4-8 as consistent with the epistle's overall readership, acknowledging that a believer can reject Christ.

The loss of rewards

Some scholars who argue that the experience described in 6:4-8 is not terminal have defended their view by asserting that the author of Hebrews referred to the loss of rewards. They do not think that fall away meant anything related to the loss of salvation. This view envisages Paul's concept of "being saved as if from the fire" (1 Corinthians 3:15). "We must admit that there is nothing in the language of Hebrews 6:4-8 and 10:26-31 to suggest it. To speak of no possibility of repentance, of re-crucifying the Son of God, and no more sacrifice for sins but only a fearful expectation of judgment and destruction (10:26-27) could hardly sound more terminal."²³

The hypothetical view.

To some scholars, the author of Hebrews describes a scenario that could never happen, but it would be impossible to repent if it happened. "But what would be the point of that? Indeed, the author does not think his readers are yet in this condition (6:9), but he fears that they could be. This is no academic flight of fancy; he is seriously worried, warning them to turn back from the brink. Moreover, with the example of Judas Iscariot fresh in the memory, no early Christian could doubt that final apostasy was not just a hypothesis.²⁴ The hypothetical view is an attempt to reconciling this passage with the theology of eternal security. However, the author's words are so strong and warning the readers of a potential fall away.

The classical reformed view

²⁰ Hodges, "Hebrews," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, 794.

²¹ Osborne, "A Classical Arminian View," in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, 112.

²² Osborne, "A Classical Arminian View," in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, 114.

²³ France, "Hebrews," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Hebrews-Revelation*, 84.

²⁴ France, "Hebrews," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Hebrews-Revelation*, 84.

On the contrary, the reformed scholars argue that the author refers to another group of people who are different from his immediate audience. First, the absence of "we" or "you" indicates a distinction between the readers in general and the apostates in particular: not that all of them would fall away, but that some among them may do so (as 3:12-13; 4:1, 11; and 12:15-16 explicitly reflect).²⁵ Fanning concurs that the details of these descriptions taken by themselves seem to point to authentic Christian experience, but the complete statements contradict this impression. The writer has portrayed the apostates in distinctly Christian terms to emphasize how close they have been to new covenant salvation and what they are spurning if they depart.²⁶

Conclusion.

A close analysis of the author's description of apostates in Hebrews 6:4-8 initially appears to allude to believers with genuine Christian experience. However, the absence of personal pronouns like "we" and "you," particularly the shift from "we will do this..." (6:3a) to "as for those..." (6:4a), suggests a distinction between the readers and the apostates. While the participial descriptions in the passage could suit believers, the disagreement arises in verse 6, where the author states that these individuals repudiate Christ, making restoration to repentance impossible, and in verse 9, where the author shows two kinds of people in mind. This raises the fundamental question of whether true believers can renounce their faith.

Since this question is difficult to resolve solely within Hebrews, a broader New Testament context is necessary. More so, theological systems offer differing perspectives: the Reformed view emphasizes God's sovereign grace in salvation, arguing that the elect cannot lose salvation as it is entirely dependent on God and not human effort. The Arminian view, conversely, posits that salvation can be lost, as eternal life is seen as a product of God's grace combined with human effort to remain faithful. From the standpoint of Biblical exegesis, this paper suggests that Hebrews 6:4-8 addresses non-Christians who experienced life within the church but were not among the elect, thus aligning with the reformed view that true believers cannot lose their salvation.

²⁵ Buist M. Fanning, "Classical Reformed Response," in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2007), 133.

²⁶ Fanning, "Classical Reformed Response," in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, 137.

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