

## CAN I FALL AWAY? Hebrews 5:10-6:20

Every preacher's job can be summarized like this: to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comforted. And so, from this preacher who wrote Hebrews, we get both a warning and a comfort.

This passage might be the most controversial I have ever preached- and it would be no matter what interpretation of it I took. It's a hard passage and there are many ways of looking at it and many things that play into it. I want you to remember that although we're promised that the ordained preacher speaks as the voice of Christ, it is only inasmuch as he is faithful to the text. I pray that I'm faithful to this text, but realize that many good people fall in different places in interpreting this.

We need to read this in the context of the audience: first-century Christians who were in the minority and experiencing such hardship they were in danger of giving up. But we also need to remember that this text is given for us, as Romans 15:4 tells us, "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." Are you in danger of giving up? Do you need hope? This message may be hard, but there is gold at the end of this rainbow.

### *The Certainty of Despair*

The author starts out with a stern warning for people who are described in admittedly ambiguous terms. Greek scholars tell us we should understand the force of the verb in verse 4 as something like 'Once-for-all been enlightened.' There is a finality here that's echoed in the verb in verse 6, 'once-for-all fallen away.' This is not a temporary situation, it's a conclusive rejection of something. What is that something? Let's look at the experience that's described: verse 4 mentions they have 'tasted the heavenly gift.' Is there a difference between tasted and eaten? Some commentators would argue yes, some would argue no.

Verse 6 goes on to mention they have 'shared in the Holy Spirit.' This seems to be very strong language, but does it describe someone who's been converted to Christianity or someone who has just been exposed to religious things? Again, commentators are divided on the question. Verse 6 says these people have 'tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come.' This is probably less strong language than in the previous verse, but still indicates some religious experience.

Some say this passage teaches that you can lose your salvation? It seems that if this is about a true believer, then this passage proves too much! Most people I know who hold to salvation by works want to say that you can earn and lose your salvation. But, there are no second chances here, if you fall away it is *impossible* to restore you to repentance again.

Two things that make me think differently about this passage, that it is not talking about losing your salvation. First, in verse 9, the author admits that while all those phrases seemed to talk about salvation, he makes clear: no, those are experiences that are less than salvation. Then he goes on to speak to his audience, 'beloved,' which is his term for believers. He's saying, in effect, 'Those who fall away from their religious experience don't have hope, but now let's talk about things pertaining to your salvation, *for your*

*hope* ! The second thing that convinces me that verses 4-6 are less than salvation is all of the covenantal terminology. We see the presence of blessings and curses in verses 7 and 8. This should make us think of the covenants of the Old Testament that always included blessings and curses for obeying and disobeying. But, there is a distinction between being in the covenant and being saved in Christ. Being in the covenant in the Old Testament, being circumcised, worshipping at the temple did not save you- as Paul says 'not all [physical] Israel was [spiritual] Israel .' So, what is it that saved people in Israel ? Faith. Conversely in the New Testament being in the covenant, being baptized, going to church, does not save you. What does? Faith alone.

So, we go back to the question: "Can I lose my salvation?" You can't lose it if it's not yours! If you own it, you can lose it. Just this week I found myself buying a pair of sunglasses, my 6th pair this year. I keep losing them, so I have to keep getting new ones.

But when it comes to my salvation, salvation belongs to the Lord! It is not mine, I am elect in Christ. God is in control of my destiny- and God doesn't lose things. *The Bible is clear- you cannot lose your salvation if it is real! You cannot be justified and then unjustified, forgiven and then unforgiven. God's stamp upon you is forever.*

This passage is not about backsliding, it's not about the ongoing struggle with sin in the life of a Christian. This passage is about faith, and verses 4-6 describe people who never had genuine faith. They were a part of the church but became apostate because they never truly put their trust in Christ.

The doctrine of apostasy is for unbelievers living in the church right now. This is a theme over and over again in Scripture, examine yourself closely. We hear it when Jesus speaks about those who will plead to enter heaven saying, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And Jesus says He will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness." We hear it later when Jesus warns the religious people of Capernaum that "it will be better for Sodom [the worst pagans!] than for you." And again, in Revelation 3 he tells the church at Laodicea to be either hot or cold, in other words *follow Christ or oppose Christ, but don't join the church if you don't really believe!*

Now, if you are here and you're honestly asking questions about God, if you're searching, let me say that I am glad that you're here. Stay honest about where you are and ask God the hard questions: He can handle them! But resist the urge to make church about some other agenda than the kingdom of God . Some people go to church to find a good spouse. Some people go because it makes them 'feel good.' Some people join a church so their kids will be raised in the church. Some people join a church for business connections. These are not necessarily bad motives, but if they are your sole motives you are in deep waters. You're heaping up judgment on yourself by joining the church without a real faith in Christ. This is the reason why I fence the table when we do communion- because the Supper is for believers and something real happens there that blesses believers but curses unbelievers. So I fence the table to protect those who don't know Christ from being harmed by His power!

I want to stop to make an observation here: the modern church often struggles with a tightrope that we walk (which is actually probably a wide road): between over-emphasizing the church and under-emphasizing the church. Going to church does not make you a Christian, as my friend used to say "any more than going to MacDonalds makes you a hamburger." But the Church is still the ground and pillar of the truth, and

outside of her there is no ordinary salvation. This passage very much keeps us on that tightrope.

Should you want to join the church? YES, the church is the eternal institution. You've seen signs on buildings that are a "safe place"? The Church is the only safe place for your eternal future. But if you are just playing around in the church, if your heart does not know or honor God, if you are ready to jump ship as soon as a better offer comes along, you have no hope!

### *The Cry of Hope*

This passage is one of the greatest passages on hope in the Bible. When you think about it you shouldn't think of it as that 'passage that nobody understands and that says repentance is impossible.' You should think of it as a place where God reminds you how much He loves you and is with you every step of the way! Look at verse 10, "God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake." God delights in the good things you do in His name. Let's go on to verse 11, "And we desire each one of you 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." He's saying, we want you to have hope so that you won't be sluggish or depressed, but you'll be full of energy! Notice what things the preacher puts forward as reasons for their hope- "the promises [of God]."

What things are you doing to try to bring yourself hope to the end? For some of us it's ministry; if I do enough for God, surely I'll make it. For some it's family; if my family looks good, that's all anyone can require of me, anyway. Or how about avoiding sin; if I avoid the big stuff, I can sneak the little stuff past the gatekeepers, right?

What's wrong with all these approaches? They're all based on *our performance*. The writer to the Hebrews says "look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith." You should look at your life to see if God has been at work (I John lists 3 things we can use to measure our assurance: right Christology, love of God's commands, and love of the brothers) but for every one look at your life you take, take ten looks to the promises of Scripture. Look to Genesis 9, where we see the rainbow that reminds us that it is God who saves us from the future judgment. Look to Exodus 12, where the Passover reminds us of the God who does whatever it takes to set His people free. Look to Leviticus 25, where the Year of Jubilee reminds us that it is God who is bringing a final rest for all things. Look to Ezekiel 37, where the Valley of Dry Bones reminds us of the God who brings the dead to life.

In Hebrews 7, the writer is going to say, 'Look to God's oath, know that you can take that promise to the bank.' That oath is Jesus. Because He went past the curtain into the Most Holy Place, so we get to go past the curtain into the presence of the Most Holy Friend, how are you feeling right now? If you feel smug and comfortable because you're a pretty good person you haven't heard a word I've said. If you feel comforted and hopeful because of Jesus, though, that's good. If you're terrified right now- that might be good. It might be the Spirit's prompting you to run to Jesus. *Put your trust in Him alone to get you to the end.*

### *The Call To Discipleship*

The last question that we need to ask ourselves is: Are we as a church getting people in and then dropping the ball? Let's look at Matthew 23:15, where Jesus says some pretty haunting words to the Pharisees, "Woe to you...for you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves." We need to be faithful to proclaim the gospel to lost people, but just getting them in isn't enough. We are responsible to disciple them (in grace and not works righteousness, as the Pharisees did), to help them persevere to the end, knowing that it is ultimately the Holy Spirit who takes us to the finish line.

Also, we are reminded that we must disciple and watch over our children. Baptism brings them into the covenant, it does not save them. Are we being faithful to the vow we take every time we baptize a child, to assist the parents in the nurture of the children and to pray for them and love them in the midst of the covenant community?

Dick and Rick Hoyt are a father and son team that I recently read about. When Rick was born, the umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck and cut off his breathing for a time so that he was left mute and somewhat paralyzed. As he grew, though, his father knew that he had a good bit of cognitive awareness. Dick determined that he was going to help his son live life, and despite being a non-athletic type, he began training for a marathon. He ran his first marathon pushing Rick in a wheelchair the whole way. Dick and Rick have run every Boston Marathon since 1981. And Dick didn't stop there. He trained for a triathlon, which means he swam 2.4 miles pulling Rick in an inflatable boat (a Herculean task in itself from my perspective), then rode a bike 112 miles with Rick in a seat on front, and then ran the 26.2 miles with Rick to get to the finish line. What a picture of us who are so weak and needy, and of Jesus, who is the author and finisher of our faith.

Some of the resources I used in this series on Hebrews were *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment* by Bill Lane, *NIV Application Commentary* by George Guthrie, *Hebrews* by Phillip Edgecumbe Hughes, *Themes in Hebrews* by Geerhardus Vos, classroom lectures by Dr. Bob Cara and Dr. Dan Doriani, sermons by Dr. Tim Keller, Douglas Wilson, and John Piper, and various other random thoughts and quotes by C.S. Lewis and many others. The reader should assume that little, if any, of this material is truly original.