**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**Hebrews (16): The Book Of Better Things**

**“The Real Risk for Unsaved ‘Christians’”**

**Hebrews 6:4-8**

**April 21, 2024**

I’m sure many of us know people who used to be in a Bible believing church. Perhaps they made a profession of faith and were baptized in water. Or, perhaps they were part of the worship team or involved in the leadership of their church. Some may have even gone to a Bible college or a theological seminary.

But then something happened. The trials and troubles and temptations that came their way proved to be too much. Over time, they turned away from the church and rejected everything they came to know and believe. Today, many of them want nothing to do with Christianity.

So, what happened to these people? Some would argue that they were genuinely saved but later turned away from Christ and lost their salvation (the Arminian view). Others argue that they were genuinely saved and will always and forever be saved. But since they didn’t remain faithful to Christ, they won’t enjoy heaven as much as they could. They’ll simply lose their heavenly rewards (the Antinomian view).

But there are others, including myself, who believe that they were never saved in the first place. According to Hebrews 3:14 (and 3:6), we believe that “*we have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first*.” Holding firmly to the end (persevering in the faith) proves that we have become a partaker of Christ; *not* holding firmly to the end (apostatizing from the faith) proves that we never were a partaker of Christ.

One of the reasons for these divergent views is found in the verses before us today (Heb. 6:4-6). It’s the third of the five warnings within this letter, and it has been subjected to a number of substantially different interpretations. On the surface, at least, it seems that the author is describing people who were genuine Christians; they “*have once been enlightened, . . . and 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 coming age*” (vv. 4-5). Then he sounds his warning; if those who have been so blessed fall away, it is impossible for them to be brought back to repentance.

But what follows is a short parable that clarifies the kind of people who are in view (vv. 7-8). There are *two different kinds* of land, our author says, and both receive rain. The first kind yields useful crops and reaps God’s blessing. The second yields only worthless vegetation, and in the end will be burned. Likewise, there are two kinds of people within the church. Those who respond to the gospel with saving faith bring forth fruit and are blessed. Others, however, are like the field that *only* produces thorns and thistles, and they reap God’s judgment.

As we know from last week’s study, our author has just rebuked his readers for their “dullness” of hearing (5:11-14). Then he’s urged them to move past the elementary doctrines of Christ and press on to maturity (6:1-2). This we will do, he has said, “*if God permits*” (6:3). That’s his introduction to verses 4-8, where he reveals that for some people repentance has become an impossibility.

**A. The Warning (6:4-6):** “*For it is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace*.” There are three questions that we must ask of these verses:

**1Q.** **Who are the people mentioned in these verses?** **A.** They are people who have participated fully in the Christian community. *First*, they have “once been enlightened.” They have heard the truth of the gospel; they understand what it means; and if asked, they can articulate it clearly to others. But merely understanding gospel truths does not mean one is saved!

*Second*, they have “*tasted the heavenly gift* . . .” and “*the goodness of the word of God*” and “*the powers of the age to come*.” They are no strangers to the gospel, or to the church. They have experienced some degree of spiritual blessing through their close association with genuine believers. They have heard the Word, participated in the Lord’s Supper, listened to the life-changing testimonies of others, and their thanksgivings for answered prayer. They may have even seen some of the signs and wonders that our author has described in Hebrews 2:4. But that doesn’t necessarily mean they had embraced and trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ as their only hope of eternal life!

*Third,* they have “*shared in the Holy Spirit*.” While it’s true that the word translated “share” can refer to a saving participation in Christ (Cf. Heb. 3:14), it can also mean that these people had come to participate in the Holy Spirit’s ministry within the local church. They probably felt the power of the Holy Spirit at work through the communion of the saints when they assembled on the Lord’s Day. They probably saw the gifts of the Holy Spirit at work as well. But that doesn’t necessarily mean they were saved.

*Fourth*, they have in some sense “*repented*”. Yes, godly sorrow for sins brings repentance that leads to salvation (2 Cor. 7:10a); but there is a “*worldly sorrow*” that leads to death (2 Cor. 7:10b). The clear implication is that there is a kind of repentance that does *not* lead to salvation. The “repentance” of Esau (Heb. 12:17) and Judas Iscariot (Matt. 27:3) are good examples of this.

**2Q. What happens to these people? A.** If they fall away from the light they have received, they place themselves beyond the possibility of repentant faith, and therefore out of the reach of God’s saving grace: “*For it is impossible . . . to be brought back to repentance*.”

In the previous warning, our author has reminded his readers of the generation of Israelites whom God had redeemed from Egyptian bondage. They had put the blood of the Passover lamb on the doorposts in Egypt. They had crossed the Red Sea. They were led by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. They had tasted the waters at Marah and Elim, and ate “the manna” God had provided. Yet these same people hardened their hearts in unbelief, and “turned away from” the living God (Heb. 3:12). These are the people of whom God has said: “*As I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest*” (Heb. 3:11; Ps. 95:11). Just as that wilderness generation could not enter the Promised Land, so some of these readers could not be brought back to repentance if they turned against the light that they had received.

**3Q. Why is it impossible to renew these people to repentance**? **A.** Our author gives two reasons: “*to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again*,” and they are “*subjecting him to public disgrace*.” What’s in view is the hostile attitude that an apostate has toward Christ. It’s the result of a gradual hardening process within his heart.

As the notes in our ESV Study Bible explain, it “involves a sustained, committed rejection of Christ and a departure from the Christian community . . . ‘*Crucifying Christ once again*’ graphically portrays rejection of Jesus. ‘*Holding* (him) *to public disgrace*’ conveys the idea of a public, shameful display. The warning . . . is substantial: such a falling away treats God’s own Son with such serious rejection that it is as if the person wanted again to put Christ on a cross; after such a departure there can be no return.”

*That’s the real risk for unsaved “Christians” who were once part of a Bible-believing local assembly*. They may cross a line that puts them beyond the possibility of repentance, and thus out of the reach of God’s saving grace. No one knows at what point someone may cross that line. But there is a line, and once it is crossed, it’s the point of no return.

**B. The Clarification of the Warning (6:7-8):** “*Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will burn*.”

Here’s the meaning of the parable: the rain represents the extraordinary blessings that our author has just mentioned, and the two kinds of land represent the readers of the letter. The rain falls on both the good ground and the bad – all within the visible Christian community – who “*have been enlightened*” . . . and “*have tasted*” . . . and “*shared*” in these wonderful spiritual blessings.

After the rain falls, *both* kinds of “soil” look promising at first, as both are covered with fresh green growth. Over time, however, the vegetation growing in the bad soil turns into worthless thorns and thistles; while the good soil yields the fruit useful to the farmer. The good soil receives God’s blessing and enters into His promised rest (Heb. 4:11). But the “bad soil” has *nothing* to look forward to except “*the fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God*” (Heb. 10:27). Such is the inevitable end of all apostates; they represent the land that will be burned.

So, here is the lesson for us today: All of us know people, perhaps even family members, who have repeatedly been exposed to the truth of the gospel. They understand what it means, and they can explain it to others, because at one time they said they embraced it for themselves. But they have turned their backs on Jesus Christ, and have so hardened their hearts that what He said and did no longer matters. **Q.** So, how should we respond? **A.** We should never stop praying for them and pleading with them to come to Christ. For they may be perilously close to “*crucifying the Son of God all over again . . .and subjecting him to public disgrace*.”

All of us must realize that Jesus Christ is the only hope for forgiveness of sin. There is no other pathway into the presence of God. There is no other road to redemption. Those who repudiate the salvation won by Christ will find none anywhere else. All of us must also realize that the perseverance of the saints offers proof of the reality of our confession. For “*we have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first*” (Heb. 3:14). And this we shall do, by His grace!

Through many dangers, toils, and snares,

I have already come.

‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,

And grace will lead me home.

(John Newton, 1775)