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Hebrews #16

### Unsaved “Believers” Hebrews 6:4-9

It has been slightly more than a year and a half since we concluded a brief series of sermons on the question of whether or not born-again believers in Jesus Christ can lose or forfeit their salvation. We looked at virtually all the passages in the NT to determine if a person who has been justified by faith in Jesus Christ can somehow experience *de-justification*. Can a person who has been fully forgiven of their sins do something that would lead God to once again regard them as guilty for their sins and thus liable to eternal punishment for them? *Can a true child of God be cast out of the divine family?* In other words, can someone who has been adopted by God as a spiritual son or daughter lose their status and be eternally ostracized from the family of faith? Can someone who has been redeemed by the blood of Jesus fall back into bondage and spiritual slavery?

Those of you who were present for that series of messages will remember that my answer to those questions is No. ***I believe that those who have genuinely been born again and have put their trust in Christ are eternally secure in their salvation.*** That doesn't mean they can't sin. They can; sometimes grievously. It doesn't mean that true Christians can't backslide. They can; and occasionally do. What it does mean is that ***God will graciously preserve them in faith and protect them so that they don't fully and finally turn away from him in unbelief.***

During the course of our series on this subject I provided you with a hypothetical scenario designed to help us think through the question more closely. The scenario concerns a young man that we called Charley. Let me tell you his story once again.

Charley was born into a Christian family, attended church throughout his teen-aged years, and appeared to give every indication that he was born-again and had put his faith in Jesus Christ. Following graduation from high school, he fell in with a different group of friends at college. They challenged his faith and insisted that he was naïve to believe in Jesus.

It wasn't long before Charley stopped attending church and eventually declared himself to be an atheist. His anger and resentment towards anything remotely religious grew with each passing day. Charley is now 30, already twice divorced, an alcoholic, and painfully bitter and unpleasant to be around. He wants nothing ever again to do with Christianity. So what's up with Charley? What happened?

Some argue that Charley was genuinely converted and saved but later *apostatized and fell away* from his faith and as a result forfeited or lost his salvation. Others argue that, if Charley was genuinely converted, he is still saved, but his lifestyle will result in *the loss of those rewards* in

heaven that he otherwise would have experienced. In other words, once Charley was saved he is always and forever saved. But he will not enjoy heaven as much as he otherwise would. What he forfeits or loses isn't his salvation, but rather the blessings and authority and joy that would otherwise have been his in eternity had he remained faithful to Christ.

Finally, others, such as yours truly, believe that *if Charley was genuinely saved when he was younger he is still saved today*. But, God will not allow Charley to remain unrepentant in his sin. As a loving and faithful heavenly Father, God will bring conviction to his heart regarding his sin; he will discipline Charley, and eventually restore him to a vibrant and healthy relationship with Christ.

Or it may be the case that, notwithstanding his early zeal and profession of faith, *Charley was never saved in the first place*. Perhaps he is like those people in the Gospel of John who are said to have "believed" in Jesus in some sense of the term but clearly not in a saving sense. For example, we read this in John 2:23-25 –

“Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many *believed* in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man” (John 2:23-25).

Yet another instance is found in John 6. You may recall that after Jesus insisted that those who follow him must “eat his flesh” and “drink his blood” (6:53), many were befuddled and bothered. We read in John 6:60 that “when many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?’” This is then followed in 6:66 with the declaration: “After this many of *his disciples* turned back and no longer walked with him.” The point is that there are different levels of discipleship, different qualities of commitment, some that are genuinely the fruit of saving faith and others that are not.

Or again, we hear Jesus say this in another passage from John's gospel:

“So Jesus said to the Jews who had *believed* him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples’” (John 8:31).

But we know that many of these who “believed” in him were not saved, for Jesus goes on to describe them as children of “your father the devil” (8:44). *The point is that John has no problem speaking of people who had “believed” in Jesus and had become “disciples” of Jesus who in point of fact were not born again and by their failure to “abide” in his “word” demonstrated that their so-called “faith” was spurious and superficial and that they were not “truly” his “disciples.” They were deluded as to their true spiritual condition.*

And then there is the parable of the soils, in which a man sowed seed among many different types of soil. The “seed” of course is the gospel message and the “soil” is the human heart. Jesus

says that some hear the word of the gospel and immediately receive it with joy. Notice: they “receive” it and do so with “joy”. But, says Jesus, such a person “has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately falls away” (Matt. 13:21).

Thus we see that a person can “hear” the gospel and “believe” certain things about Jesus and “receive” the message of the gospel and experience “joy” in it and even be portrayed as a “disciple” of Jesus and yet never be born again, never be justified by faith in the cross of Christ. Just think of Judas Iscariot who lived and ministered alongside of Jesus for three years but never was born again.

Those who insist that Charley was genuinely converted and saved early in life and then later apostatized and lost his salvation will typically point to Hebrews 6 in defense of their view. I am among those who believe that the people described here in Hebrews 6 are **not** born again; they are men and women who have heard the gospel and responded in some measure to it, perhaps even with joy, and have enjoyed the many benefits of life in the local church, only at some later time to have abandoned their profession of faith and turned away from Christ and the gospel.

I know the question you are asking: “How can people like these in Hebrews 6 be unsaved? What could it mean to say that a person who is not born again has been ‘enlightened’ and has ‘tasted the heavenly gift’ and has even ‘shared in the Holy Spirit’?”

There are probably a dozen or more interpretive options of this passage. It isn’t my purpose to interact with them here. Rather, I am focusing solely on the question of whether the terminology in vv. 4-5 would lead us to conclude that these individuals were born-again, justified, believers.

This leads me to ask, ***“Is it possible for a person to experience some form of spiritual ‘enlightenment’ and to ‘taste’ spiritual blessings and to ‘partake’ of the Holy Spirit and yet never know Jesus in a saving way?”*** I believe the answer to this question is Yes. Let me begin by giving six reasons from the book of Hebrews itself why these people are *not* born-again believers who have apostatized.

### **Reasons Why the People in Hebrews 6:4-6 are *Not* Christians**

***First, the situation described in vv. 4-6 is illustrated in vv. 7-8.*** There we read, “For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it [this drinking of frequent rain refers to the blessings of vv. 4-5: enlightenment, partaking of the Holy Spirit, tasting spiritual blessings, etc.], and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it yields thorns and thistles [this corresponds to the “falling away” of v. 6a], it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.”

Rain falls on all kinds of ground, but one cannot tell from that alone what kind of vegetation, if any, will appear. The picture here is not of ground that receives frequent rain, yields life and

vegetation, and then loses it. The picture is of *two different kinds of ground altogether*. One responds to the rain [spiritual blessings and opportunities] by producing bountiful vegetation, while the other is barren, lifeless, and thus condemned. Likewise, people who hear the gospel and respond with saving faith bring forth life. Others, however, who sit in church and hear the truth and are blessed by the ministry of the Holy Spirit but eventually turn their back on it all are like a field that never yields vegetation and thus comes into judgment.

***Second, in 6:9 we read of a significant contrast: “Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things – things that belong to salvation.”*** The “better things” in view are stated in vv. 10-12, things like “work” and “love” and “serving the saints” and “diligence” and “full assurance of hope” and “faith” and “patience” and “inheriting the promises.” These “things” are “better” than the experiences of vv. 4-6 precisely because they “belong to” or “accompany” *salvation*.

In other words, the author of Hebrews is confident that most of those reading his letter have experienced and displayed “better things” than those people whom he described in vv. 4-6. These things are “better” because they involve salvation. His obvious point is that the blessings in vv. 4-6 do **not** pertain to salvation. The contrast is unmistakable and clear!

Before going farther, let’s summarize vv. 7-12. The illustration in verses 7-8 compares the people in vv. 4-6 to land that fails to produce fruit. It only yields thorns and thistles. These people, then, were obviously never genuinely converted or saved. Then, in verses 9-12, he says that his readers, whom he calls “beloved” (v. 9a), have experienced “better things” than any of the temporary experiences of vv. 4-6. These are “things” that pertain to the genuine experience of salvation. It would seem clear, then, that both the analogy in vv. 7-8 and the explicit assertion in v. 9 tell us that the people described in vv. 4-6 were never truly saved in the first place.

***Third, according to Hebrews 3:14 (and 3:6), “we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.”*** Note well: he says we “*have come*” to share in Christ, not “will come” or “are now partakers,” if we persevere in faith. In other words, holding fast in faith, i.e., persevering and producing spiritual fruit, proves that you *became* a partaker of Christ in the past. Failing to hold fast, i.e., apostatizing from the faith, proves that you *never were* a partaker of Christ. ***Apostasy or falling away (6:6a) doesn’t mean you once were in and have now fallen out of a saving relationship to Christ. It means you never were in or never became a partaker with Christ in the first place.***

***Fourth, we read in Hebrews 10:14 that “by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”*** Here we are told that for those who are now being sanctified (i.e., indwelt by the Holy Spirit, growing in holiness by faith) “the offering of Christ on the cross *has perfected that person for all time*. For all time! In other words to become a beneficiary of the perfecting, justifying work of Christ on the cross is to be perfected in the sight of God forever. This suggests that Hebrews 6:6 does not mean that those who re-crucify Christ were once really

justified by the blood of Jesus and were really being sanctified in an inward spiritual sense” (Piper, Sermon, 5).

***Fifth, our author concludes this letter with a prayer relating to the fulfillment in us of the blessings of the New Covenant.*** He prays that God would “equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (Heb. 13:21). This is the promise of the new and “eternal” covenant (v. 20): that God will put in his people a new heart and cause them to walk in his ways and not turn away from doing them good (see Ezek. 11:19; 36:27; Jer. 24:7; 32:40).

This prayer clearly tells us that perseverance in faith and in doing God’s will is ultimately the work of God in us. It is finally dependent, not on us, but on God. This is the way he fulfills his promise in the New Covenant. But if some of God’s people fail to remain believers and fail to pursue holiness of life and thus apostatize from the faith, God will himself have failed to fulfill his promise to “work in” us “what is pleasing in his sight.”

***Sixth, we must take note not just of what is said of these people in vv. 4-6 but what is not said of them that is usually said of Christians.*** Typical terms used to describe believers, such as regeneration or being born again, conversion, justified, adopted, elect, faith in Jesus, are conspicuous by their absence. This is more than merely an argument from silence when we consider the way Christians are described in *the book of Hebrews itself*. Here is a listing of what is said in Hebrews of the true believer, all of which are absent from the description of those who apostatize in 6:4-6.

- (1) God has forgiven their sins (10:17; 8:12)
- (2) God has cleansed their consciences (9:14; 10:22)
- (3) God has written his laws on their hearts (8:10; 10:16)
- (4) God is producing holiness of life in them (2:11; 10:14; 13:21)
- (5) God has given them an unshakable kingdom (12:28)
- (6) God is pleased with them (chp. 11; 13:16,21)
- (7) They have faith (4:3; 6:12; 10:22,38,39; 12:2; 13:7; etc.)
- (8) They have hope (6:11,18; 7:19; 10:23)
- (9) They have love (6:10; 10:33-34; 13:1)
- (10) They worship and pray (12:28; 13:15; 4:16; 10:22)
- (11) They obey God (5:9; 10:36; 12:10,11,14)
- (12) They persevere (3:6,14; 6:11; 10:23)
- (13) They enter God’s rest (4:3,11)
- (14) They know God (8:11)
- (15) They are God’s house, his children, his people (3:6; 2:10,13; 8:10)
- (16) They share in Christ (3:14)
- (17) They will receive future salvation (1:14; 7:25; 5:9; 9:28).

Someone might object by saying: “O.K., typical descriptions of the saved are not found in 6:4-6, but neither are typical descriptions of the lost found there either!” That’s true. But that is to be expected. After all, before they commit apostasy their spiritual status is uncertain. No one can know with certainty whether or not they are truly saved. “It remains to be seen whether they are among the saved or the lost. They have not yet given decisive indications either way. That is the reason the author warns them not to turn away – they are still at a point where a decision to be among the saved or the lost must be made” (Grudem, 171).

### **How can Non-Christians be described in these Terms?**

What about the terms used in 6:4-5 (enlightenment, tasting, sharers, etc.)? On the one hand, it is certainly the case that all Christians experience these realities. But do *only* Christians experience them? Or is it possible for these experiences also to be true of people who have been repeatedly exposed to the gospel and to the benefits it brings, yet without personally embracing the person of Christ as Lord and Savior? As we seek to answer this question *we need to keep in mind the extent to which the Holy Spirit can minister to, exert his influence upon, and richly bless people with incredible experiences and opportunities without actually causing them to be born again and without imparting to them the gift of saving faith in Jesus Christ.* Let’s look at each one in turn.

*(1) They have “once been enlightened”* – Have true Christians been “enlightened”? Yes. But this term need mean no more than to hear the gospel, to learn or to understand. Countless non-Christians who grew up in church, perhaps attended a Christian college or seminary, understand a great deal about the Christian faith. The Holy Spirit can actually enlighten them and give them insight which they in turn ultimately reject. Merely understanding Christian doctrines does not prove one is saved!

All of us know people, perhaps family members, who have been repeatedly exposed to the truth of the gospel, understand what it means, can articulate the claims of Christ with incredible precision, yet refuse to put their trust in him as Lord and Savior. Thus, *whereas all true Christians have been enlightened, not all those who are enlightened are true Christians.*

I should also point out that in the years immediately following the death of the apostles the term “enlightened” was frequently used to describe Christian baptism. It isn’t used that way in Scripture, but it is often found in the early church fathers in reference to what one experiences in the waters of baptism. Some have argued as well that the phrase “tasted the heavenly gift” is a reference to eating and drinking the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. If so, our author would be saying that these people have been baptized and have regularly participated in the Lord’s Supper, but never came fully and finally to saving faith in Christ. This interpretation is doubtful, but it is worth noting.

*(2) Here we will combine three of these phrases: they have “tasted the heavenly gift” and “the goodness of the word of God” and “the powers of the age to come”* – This certainly points to a

genuine spiritual experience. But must we conclude that it was a genuine *saving* spiritual experience? These are not strangers to the gospel or to the church. These are people who have come under conviction of the Holy Spirit, who have experienced some degree of blessing both through common grace and through their close, intimate contact with genuine believers.

Perhaps they have been healed (remember: the vast majority whom Jesus healed were not saved). Perhaps a demon has been cast out. They have heard the Word of God and have come to taste and feel and enjoy something of its power and beauty and truth. They have felt the “wooing” of the Spirit and have seen great and wonderful things in the body of Christ. Those in Matthew 7:22-23 preached, prophesied, performed miracles, and cast out demons in Christ’s name . . . *but were not saved*. Jesus said to them: “I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers” (v. 23). These, then, “have tasted” the power and blessings of the new covenant, but *they have not personally prized, cherished, embraced, loved, trusted, treasured, or savored the atoning death of Jesus as their only hope for eternal life*.

**(3) They “have shared in the Holy Spirit”** – Whereas the word translated “shared” or “partaken” can certainly refer to a saving participation in Christ (cf. Heb. 3:14), it can also refer to a looser association or participation. See Luke 5:7; Heb. 1:9 (“comrades” or “companions”). These people had in some way come to share in some aspect of the Holy Spirit and his ministry. But in what way? Must we conclude that it was a “saving” way? Why does our author *not* use terminology that would put the question of their spiritual status to rest, such as “filled with” the Spirit or “baptized in” or “indwelt by” the Holy Spirit?

**(4) They have in some sense “repented”** – There is a “sorrow for sins” and a turning from them that even non-believers can experience. This is clear from Hebrews 12:17 and the reference to Esau, as well as the “repentance” of Judas Iscariot in Matthew 27:3. Paul refers to a repentance “that leads to salvation without regret” (2 Cor. 7:10a) as well as “a worldly grief [that] produces death” (2 Cor. 7:10b). The implication is that there is a kind of repentance that does *not* lead to salvation. As with “belief” and “faith”, so too with “repentance,” we must always distinguish between what is substantial and saving, on the one hand, and what is spurious on the other.

Wayne Grudem provides this helpful summation:

“What has happened to these people? They are at least people who have been affiliated closely with the fellowship of the church. They have had some sorrow for sin and a decision to forsake their sin (*repentance*). They have clearly understood the gospel and given some assent to it (they have been *enlightened*). They have come to appreciate the attractiveness of the Christian life and the change that comes about in people’s lives because of becoming a Christian, and they have probably had answers to prayers in their own lives and felt the power of the Holy Spirit at work, perhaps even using some spiritual gifts (they have become ‘associated with’ the work of the Holy Spirit or have become *partakers* of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the heavenly gift and the powers of the age to come).

They have been exposed to the true preaching of the Word and have appreciated much of its teachings (they have *tasted* the goodness of the Word of God). These factors are all positive, and people who have experienced these things may be genuine Christians. But these factors alone are not enough to give conclusive evidence of any of the decisive beginning stages of the Christian life (regeneration, saving faith and repentance unto life, justification, adoption, initial sanctification). In fact, *these experiences are all preliminary to those decisive beginning stages of the Christian life*. The actual spiritual status of those who have experienced these things is still unclear” (153).

I conclude that ***the people described in 6:4-5 who, according to v. 6, “have fallen away” are not now and never were born-again believers***. They are not Christians who have “lost” their salvation. They are non-Christians who perhaps made a profession of faith in Jesus, perhaps became members of a church, perhaps even participated in leadership, were probably baptized and came often to the Lord’s Table, and then willfully and with a hard heart turned away and rejected everything they had come to know.

I believe the spiritual state and experience of those described in Hebrews 6:4-6 is virtually identical to that of the first three of four soils in the parable of the sower (see Matthew 13:3-23; Mark 4:1-9; Luke 8:4-15). In that parable, only the fourth soil is called “good” and subsequently bears fruit. The other three represent those who hear the gospel and respond with varying degrees of understanding, interest, and joy, none of which, however, bear fruit that would testify of genuine spiritual life. That is to say, they experienced “enlightenment” and “tasted” the goodness and power of the ministry of the Spirit and the blessings of the kingdom, yet turned their back on the truth when trials, troubles, or temptations came their way. Their apostasy was proof of the falsity of their initial “faith” (see esp. John 8:31; Heb. 3:6,14; 1 John 2:19).

My response to this passage, therefore, isn’t to lament over those who supposedly once were saved but now are irrevocably lost. My response is to appeal to you who have become comfortable in your surface familiarity with the Christian faith and yet have kept Christ at arm’s length. My appeal is to you who have grown in your understanding of Christianity and have experienced great blessings because of your presence here and your association with the church, and yet you do not trust and treasure Jesus above all else. My appeal to you is to repent and believe the gospel lest after some time you fall away from what you know and are guilty of holding Christ up for contempt.

Please remember this: once you finally and forever turn your back on Jesus Christ and so harden your heart as to exclude him altogether, you cut yourself off from the only hope for forgiveness. There is no other way. There is no other atonement for sin. There is no other pathway into the presence of God. There is no other road to redemption. There is no other person or philosophy or religion or ritual that can reconcile you to God and obtain for you eternal salvation.



I'm not capable, and no one else is either, of determining if or when and at what point someone crosses that line and puts himself beyond the possibility of repentance and thus out of reach of God's saving grace. But there is a line! So I plead with you: Lay hold of Christ now! Trust Christ now! Repent now! Believe now that he is Lord and that his death on the cross for sinners is your only hope! In your heart, say yes to him now!

So let's close by praying for those we know and love who are either wondering or wandering! Let's also intercede on behalf of that son or daughter, that husband or wife, that friend or extended family member who has seen and heard much of Christ but has turned away from him and may be perilously close to "crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt" (6:6).