

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Exegetical Paper on Hebrews 6:1-8

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Hebrews

by

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Table of Contents

I.	Introduction	2
II.	Hebrews 6:1-8	3
	A. Moving to Maturity, v.1-3	3
	B. Issue of Repentance, v.4-6	5
	C. Blessings and Curses, v.7-8	8
III.	The Question of Salvation	9
IV.	Conclusion	11
	Bibliography	14

Introduction

Hebrews 6:1-8 is a challenging passage for believers to reconcile. Is the author suggesting that salvation can be lost? Or is a warning of a different sort? While there are a range of opinions and interpretations when it comes to Hebrews, in particular the passages warning about salvation, there is one point where it seems all can agree: Hebrews is a puzzle!¹

Inspired scriptures must agree on the issue of salvation; if the inspiration is of God it cannot contradict itself. Instead, any perceived contradiction must be the result of fallen man's imperfect ability to understand the nature of salvation fully. The intent of this paper is to demonstrate that salvation cannot be lost, a reality communicated throughout the scriptures including Hebrews.

The style of Hebrews is much more like a sermon rather than a written work, perhaps contributing to some of the challenges in understanding it. While the author is unknown, it is clear that he or she was knowledgeable of Old Testament scriptures, was highly educated, and committed to God.² Because the author is unknown, dating the book becomes challenging as well – however, due to it being cited in the work “I Clement”, which is dated around the end of the first century, we know it was written before then.³ Understanding the context of Hebrews; its style of writing, date, its Jewish audience, is a vital part of the process in interpreting the message of the author.

¹ Herbert Bateman IV, ed., *Four Views On the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2007), location 1241.

² George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews (The NIV Application Commentary)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 25.

³ Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews (New International Commentary On the New Testament)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), location 515.

Hebrews 6:1-8

Moving to Maturity, v.1-3

Because chapter six begins with the word $\delta\iota\omicron$, translated “so then”, or “therefore,”⁴ it becomes clear that what follows is directly connected to, or a result of, the previous passage. According to Lane, the “chapter break is both unwarranted and unfortunate.”⁵ Hebrews 5:11-14 paves the way for chapter six by pointing out three warning signs of immaturity in the readers of Hebrews; (1) their inability to teach others, (2) they need spiritual milk, not meat, and (3) they are spiritually unable to discern good from evil.⁶

The underlying theme in 5:11-14, though, is that these men and women of the church are working out their sanctification, not their salvation.⁷ They could be believers, and having laid the groundwork of the author’s concerns in chapter five, 6:1-8 then begins the exploration of the ramifications of that reality. What is fascinating, though, is the author’s approach. He (or she) has basically just said in chapter five that the readers are only able to handle spiritual milk, and yet opens chapter six with an attitude of charging forward into the spiritual meat anyway!

The word choice is interesting, as F.F. Bruce notes. Rather than saying “nevertheless” they will press on, which would imply that they would progress in spite of the readers’ weaknesses, it is written “therefore.” In other words, as a direct result of their own lack of

4 William L. Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 47a, Hebrews 1-8*, (Dallas, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 139.

5 Ibid, 139.

6 David L. Allen, *Hebrews: an Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (New American Commentary)* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), 338.

7 Ibid, 339.

understanding the author is going to proceed.⁸ Bruce suggests that a proper understanding would see that the readers have been immature too long, therefore the author will give them something intended to challenge them, to force them to think and to grow out of their immaturity.⁹ In fact, the author uses language that implies this needs to happen immediately; *φερωμεθα*, translated “let us go on,” or “pressing on,” indicates swift and energetic movement.¹⁰

Having established the need and the urgency, the author then lists six practices that are included in those foundational issues they need to move on from to further growth – in spite of their seemingly immature understanding of them. They are repentance, faith, instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection, and judgment. It has been observed that the six issues or practices mentioned are not necessarily Christian rites, but seem to have their roots in Jewish practice and could be setting the stage for a high priestly Christology.¹¹

For example, the word used for baptism, *βαπτισμων*, is actually plural and can also refer to Jewish ritual washings.¹² The author refers to these six practices as “acts that lead to death” (Hebrews 6:1). In so doing, it is made clear that these previously required acts of Temple worship practice do nothing to actually achieve salvation and trusting in them is pointless. However, Christ, does take each of these vain acts and redeem them, becoming our High Priest, and creating a way for these to actually pursue and honor God.¹³ The author is endeavoring to

8 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews (The New International Commentary On the New Testament)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 111.

9 Ibid, 111.

10 Allen, *Hebrews*, 340.

11 Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 140.

12 Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, location 3139.

13 Ibid, location 3139.

challenge the reader to grow in their understanding and perspective on these truths. It does trigger the question, however, of whether or not these readers are actually saved, or are they still relying too strongly on their Jewish heritage and the traditions that go along with the law?

Issue of Repentance, v.4-6

This passage is considered the most controversial in the book of Hebrews, as well as the New Testament as a whole.¹⁴ The crux of the argument? Is the author making the case for the loss of salvation? Are the recipients saved and facing the possibility of losing that status, or, as some commentators hint, is this a warning that author gives to help the understand the seriousness of their salvation while not actually believing it could happen to them?¹⁵ Is it an illustration regarding the lost who still cling to the Jewish rites and traditions in vain, showing the futility of their efforts? There is a lot to wrestle with.

The word translated “impossible,” αδυνατον, carries with it no uncertainty as to its meaning. Its uses elsewhere in Hebrews convey a literal understanding of the word impossible, there is no ambiguity in its usage.¹⁶ Therefore it must be literally assumed to mean that it is impossible for those who were enlightened to be brought back to repentance. But what does enlightened mean? Enlightened, as well as the other descriptions used to define this person who was once enlightened, must be understood to know who exactly is being labeled as impossible to bring back to repentance.

¹⁴ Guthrie, *Hebrews*, location 4394.

¹⁵ Ibid, location 4404.

¹⁶ Ibid, location 4404.

“Enlightened” in this passage is the Greek word φωτισθεντας, literally “brought to the light.”¹⁷ In Hebrews 10:6, a parallel usage of this word is translated “we have received knowledge of the truth.”¹⁸ It communicates an illumination of knowledge for the recipient through the action of God.

“Who have tasted the heavenly gift” is another perspective on the same idea communicated by “enlightened.” While some have speculated that “tasted” conveys the idea that the heavenly gift was somehow only sampled and not actually experienced, this goes against its usage elsewhere in scripture and seems to be a stretch.¹⁹ A more accurate understanding would see this phrase painting the picture of a partner or associate in a legal or moral context, in other words, someone who has shared in spiritual realities.²⁰

“Who have shared in the Holy Spirit” again clarifies the previous two statements. These are not separate acts but restatements of the same act.²¹ While some have suggested that the lack of a definite article here in the Greek when referring to the Holy Spirit could be understood to not be referring to the Holy Spirit Himself, but instead to the works of the Holy Spirit, there is not enough evidence to say it definitively that this phrase refers to the Holy Spirit or His actions.²² What is clear, however, is that a close association with the Holy Spirit has occurred,

¹⁷ Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 141.

¹⁸ Ibid, 141.

¹⁹ Guthrie, *Hebrews*, location 4441.

²⁰ Ibid, location 4441.

²¹ Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 141.

²² Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 121.

which lends itself to the idea that the Holy Spirit has been received as opposed to simply gifts of the Spirit.²³

“Who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age” continues the pattern of restating the original comment and detailing who exactly is “enlightened.” The same Greek word for “tasted” is again used here, leading the reader to understand it in the same context as before.²⁴ Consequently, it suggests that the person described has shared in spiritual realities. Bruce explains that the “powers of the coming age” refers to the miracles that they had witnessed through Christ and the apostles.²⁵ They were signs that the new covenant had begun.

“And who have fallen away.” Some have translated it “if they fall away,”²⁶ which mistakenly communicates an idea that this is conditional, as opposed to this being the culminating statement in a series of statements. Those described have experienced all the descriptions building up to this, AND have fallen away from God.

The verb used here, *παραπεσοντας*, could be translated as simply as wandering astray, however with the following results being so severe it is best understood as something far more serious, rejecting Christ.²⁷ It is in the aorist tense, which communicates a decisive moment of apostasy, there is no confusion here over whether or not the person who has fallen away has

23 Allen, *Hebrews*, 349.

24 Ibid, 349.

25 Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 122.

26 Guthrie, *Hebrews*, location 4440.

27 Ibid, location 4467.

willfully committed apostasy.²⁸ This could refer to blasphemy against Christ, or even a return to Jewish practices and belief, which would connect well with the author's frequent references to the Old Testament, and even in this context, Jewish traditions for worship.

“It is impossible ... to be brought back to repentance.” Having defined who is the target of this impossible scenario, the author brings it to the climactic statement – they cannot be brought back to repentance. The level of this apostasy prevents any kind of return to God. They are told this apostasy subjects Christ to the disgrace of the cross all over again. In the culture of the day, crucifixion was the most shameful way someone could die; it was a total humiliation and degradation of the person. Cockerill explains this verse by saying the great shame of this apostasy puts Christ through that kind of disgrace again.²⁹

Through their apostasy, they have cut themselves off from what Christ has accomplished. The impossibility of their restoration is not just because they have hardened their hearts against Christ, it is the finality and totality of their rejection of Christ that has made repentance impossible.³⁰ God will not provide an alternate way of salvation for those who have rejected the path He has put in place.

Blessings and Curses, v.7-8

The author continues the thought into verses 7-8 by using common agricultural examples, something that would have been understood far easily by the farming centric lifestyle of two thousand years ago as opposed to today, when most readers of Hebrews in America have spent

²⁸ Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 142.

²⁹ Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, location 3206.

³⁰ Ibid, location 3206.

little to no time on a farm. The purpose is to illustrate and contrast the two possible results; following and living out God's calling on one's life, or rejecting and falling away from God.

While not included in the NIV translation, the word *γαρ*, translated "for" in most versions, leads off verse seven.³¹ Its usage directly connects it to the previous verses, making the reader well aware that what follows helps to understand the verses before. One of the points driven home through this illustration is that the "initial advantage described is the same; it is only the final result that is different."³²

In either scenario, the author describes rain coming down; a picture of God's gift.³³ However, while in one example the rain produces a bountiful harvest of good fruit, a clear picture of God's blessing. The other produces nothing but weeds and thorns, ultimately necessitating the land be scourged and cleansed, a picture of God's punishment and the inevitable destruction of rejecting God's path for salvation. Regardless of the reception, the land is watered.³⁴ The crop produced varies, for the purposes of this illustration, on the reception of the person. God does not show partiality; He has given a way to salvation, those who deviate it from it will not find anything but destruction.

The Question of Salvation

Hebrews introduces deep confusion into the issue of salvation and its nature. Is it possible to lose salvation? Or once gained, is it permanent? Scholars will debate the meanings behind the

31 Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 143.

32 Ibid, 143.

33 Guthrie, *Hebrews*, location 4491.

34 N.T. Wright, *Hebrews for Everyone*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 58.

passages in Hebrews until the return of Christ; strong arguments can be made from either side based on the writings of the unknown author. The best resolution where clarity is uncertain in scripture is to look elsewhere in scripture – does the Bible state the issue more clearly elsewhere? And if so, can that then influence the interpretation of disputed scripture?

Romans 3:23-24 plainly states the lost nature of man, his helplessness in redeeming himself, and the perfect gift of salvation given from God through Christ. It goes so far as to say that it is “not of yourselves,” it is a perfect work of salvation. Romans 6:23 also emphasizes the gift aspect of salvation. Romans 8:38-39 make it clear that nothing in creation (which would include the will of man) can come between God and His children. Nothing can separate man from God, and nothing can cause Him to take back this gift He has given.

2 Corinthians 1:22 speaks of God putting His seal of ownership on His children, His Spirit in their hearts, guaranteeing their future. Can such a guarantee be broken or gone back on? 1 Peter 1:4 promises that the inheritance can never fade, or be destroyed. Throughout the New Testament, the authors seem united in the view that salvation, once attained, is permanent. God’s will is a prominent factor throughout the discussion, with the implication being that once God has willed, once He has made someone elect, then that will not be undone. His perfection demands it.

Ephesians 1:5 speaks of the believers’ adoption by God, His predestination of His followers. Paul is clear that God chooses His followers through the language of adoption. To have that salvation then removed would suggest an imperfect or erroneous mistake, or that God changes – neither of which are acceptable.

In particular, both John and Paul seem to be quite clear in their writings with the view that once saved the believer is always saved. “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).

Conclusion

N.T. Wright suggests that this passage in Hebrews can be understood best by viewing those who fall away as having been members of the church, but not Christians. They were a part of the daily life of the other believers, but did not make it personal and ultimately abandoned their pursuit of God before they ever reached the point of salvation.³⁵ It is an easy answer, but depends on the reader not looking into the passage very strenuously. The phrasings, as shown in this paper, seem to indicate that this is an unlikely interpretation.

F.F. Bruce offers two possibilities; the one being that it is properly understood that the fallen away believer cannot be restored as long as they are still fallen away. In other words, if they repent, they will no longer be fallen away and it would then be possible for them to be restored.³⁶ However, even he acknowledges that there are a lot of weaknesses with such an interpretation. The one he leans towards, instead, is that this warning is impossible for the believers to actually fall into. They cannot lose their salvation, therefore they will not commit this apostasy, and therefore will not be refused salvation. Instead, he views this as an extreme warning given to help them, in their immaturity, understand the seriousness of their salvation.³⁷ This option does allow for the security of salvation demonstrated elsewhere in scripture while

³⁵ Wright, *Hebrews for Everyone*, 58.

³⁶ Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 125.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 124.

validating the seriousness of the passage. However, it would still be a strange warning to make if there were no actual possibility of it coming to pass.

Cockerill, on the other hand, holds to an understanding that provides for a literal interpretation of this passage at face value. He believes it very much warns of the very real possibility of the saved losing their salvation.³⁸ This works well with the seemingly clear description of the recipients of this warning being saved to begin with, as opposed to Wright's explanation. However, it seems to conflict with much of the rest of the New Testament on the nature of salvation. In an interesting twist, Cockerill does offer the thought that this passage may be warning the reader that it is impossible for man to repent after such an apostasy, but to remember that there is nothing impossible for God, hinting that there may still be a way out buried within the Greek meanings of the words used.³⁹

Randall Gleason provides an explanation completely removed from the interpretations already mentioned. He proposes that Hebrews is written to the genuine Jewish believers facing persecution prior to the destruction of Jerusalem.⁴⁰ As such, the immediate threat he sees them being warned of is the literal destruction of Jerusalem, the temple, much like the consequences God would exact throughout the Old Testament. Throughout Hebrews it is evident that it is being written to a Jewish audience. This view would be supported in regards to this passage by the hints that the practices they are identified by are most likely Jewish worship practices, not Christian practices (e.g. the earlier discussion on washings). He sees the warning as a challenge for them to step up into the maturity of the Christian faith, and as believers, they would be

38 Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, location 3206.

39 Ibid, location 3206.

40 Bateman, *Four Views On the Warning Passages*, location 2611.

delivered from the consequences of the Old Covenant and the imperfect law into the blessings of the New Covenant.

Ultimately, Hebrews seems to have presented a challenge that will not be fully resolved until Christ returns and makes it clear. Considering the scriptures elsewhere that communicate the perseverance of salvation, F.F. Bruce's explanation, that this was a lesson in the seriousness of salvation and an effort to challenge the readers into deeper maturity by pushing them away from the milk they could handle to the spiritual meat they needed to wrestle with seems to be the closest to reconciling this passage with the rest of scripture.

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