

SERIES: The Absolute Supremacy of Jesus Christ

SERMON: **Bad News, Good News**

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 6:4-20

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**Introduction:** A businesswoman prays to receive Christ after her friend shares the Gospel with her, but soon she becomes disillusioned with church when she hears sermons on topics like Satan, judgment, and same-sex marriage.

A prominent black pastor leaves his Baptist church to become a Muslim, stating that Islam has become the real impetus for social change in the American black community.

A young woman in the Third World faces terrible persecution from her family and government as a result of her conversion to Christianity. Under pressure she finally recants, returning to her former religion.<sup>i</sup>

A child goes through AWANA, is baptized, and seems committed to Christ in his teen years, but falls away in college, becoming an agnostic and rejecting all he was taught in church and at home.

Such scenarios are all too common in the church today. Probably every one of us can identify individuals who once professed faith in Christ, who demonstrated enthusiasm and spiritual giftedness, who perhaps even led others to Christ, but eventually turned away and abandoned their faith. Some of us have had family members who, to our horror, have renounced the Gospel and today their lives bear no resemblance to how they were reared. How do we evaluate such cases? How should we respond to such people? If it's any consolation we are not the first to wrestle with these questions. Even the generation right after Christ had examples of seemingly dynamic Christians who tubed the faith; in fact, the Twelve Apostles had a failure rate of better than 8% (1 out of 12)!

We are starting off the New Year this morning with what is surely one of the most difficult and troubling passages in all the Bible—Hebrews 6:4-6:

*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.*

This passage is highly debated, often distorted, and always sobering. It has caused many to fear the loss of their salvation. If there is bad news in the Bible (and there certainly is), this is about the worst. But Hebrews 6:4-6 is too often studied in isolation from what comes before and after. Today I want to do my best to explain what the passage says, but more importantly, I want us to see it in context. Context is always important, but here it is absolutely critical. When we study the context, we discover that the bad news of 6:4-6 is followed immediately by some good news. Verse 9 says: "Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in

your case—things that accompany salvation.” I do not believe this is accidental. When God warns of awful judgment He almost always lets us know that better things are possible.

In the passage Josh preached so well last Sunday, the author expressed his desire to teach some deep truths about the high priesthood of Christ, but he couldn't do it (not yet at least), until he had addressed the immaturity and downright spiritual laziness of some in his audience. Josh confronted us with the desperate need for believers to grow up in their faith. As he said, bald and chubby are cute in babies, but not so cute in adulthood. Spiritually speaking, adults should be eating meat, not sucking on baby bottles.

I want us to read last week's passage again, starting in 5:11, then continue through 6:12 so we can get the full picture:

*We have much to say about this (i.e. the high priesthood of Christ), but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*

*Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so.*

*(Now here is our text for today). 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.*

*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 be burned.*

*Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation. God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.*

### **The bad news: It is impossible for some to experience saving repentance. (6:4-9)**

Before examining the meaning of 6:4-6, I want to comment briefly on some of the many difficulties in this paragraph. The grammar is difficult, the vocabulary is difficult, and the theology is difficult. First a word about the grammar. There is no main verb in this paragraph; instead it contains seven participles, which reveal seven characteristics of the persons being described:

they have been enlightened  
 they have tasted  
 they have shared  
 they have tasted (again)  
 they have fallen away  
 they are crucifying  
 they are subjecting.

And the text tells us that such individuals cannot be renewed to repentance.

Some interpreters have made much of the “if” clause in verse 6 (“*if they fall away*”), suggesting that it makes the whole warning hypothetical. In other words, *if* individuals such as are described here were to fall away from the faith, then it would be impossible for them to be renewed to repentance (but, of course, we know that isn’t really possible, since other passages tell us that a person can’t lose his salvation). But the grammar contains no “if” clause in the original, just a participle. The author is describing a real possibility, not a mere hypothetical case. The NASB and the ESV translate it correctly:

*For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame. (NASB).*

There are also difficulties of vocabulary. Many of the key words in this paragraph are ambiguous. The terms “enlightened, tasted, and shared,” are interpreted by some as clear indications that the individuals are full-fledged Christians. Others, however, see in these same words evidence that perhaps these are not real possessors of faith but merely professors. They say, for example, that to be enlightened is not necessarily to accept the light, and to taste is not necessarily to swallow. Yet it is interesting that the same word translated “taste” here in verses 4 and 5 was used back in Hebrews 2:9 where we were told that Jesus “tasted” death for everyone. Did Jesus just not really die?

In addition to difficulties of grammar and vocabulary, there are also major difficulties of theology. This may be the toughest passage in the entire Bible for those who hold to the doctrine of eternal security. But it is even difficult for those who believe a Christian can *lose* his salvation, for one thing is clear above all else from these verses, namely that if it teaches that you can lose your salvation, it also teaches that you cannot get it back. Even most Arminian or Wesleyan believers have trouble with that.

Well, all that is by way of introduction. I am now prepared to offer you the true interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6. No, seriously, I am humbled by my responsibility to preach this text. But frankly I believe this passage has probably been made more difficult than it really is. Some of the theological problems have been imported to the text by people whose principal concern is to salvage their pet theological systems—whether Calvinist or Arminian.

I am far less concerned about theological systems today than I was when I came out of Seminary. As a young man I prided myself on being Reformed, and every passage had to fit neatly into that system. I despised inconsistency and loose ends. But after 40 years of teaching God's Word I am more concerned with simply being honest with the text. I think it's important to let each passage of Scripture speak for itself, even if I can't reconcile it with every detail of every other passage. I'm not suggesting there are any *real* inconsistencies in the Scripture, but there certainly are some apparent ones to our finite minds.

When I look at this passage I see a warning addressed to a church made up primarily of Jewish Christians. In this church there are some mature believers, but there are also a fair number of immature, lazy believers who are toying with the temptation to go back to their old lives in Judaism so they can escape persecution from family and friends. Furthermore, as in every church, there are also some hypocrites, and probably even a few wolves in sheep's clothing. Every church, you know, is a mixed bag.

Since the author can't know the heart of each individual, he addresses the whole church and warns the whole church about the direction some of them are going. If he were omniscient he could have invited all the immature, lazy, phony believers into the fellowship hall and spoken only to them. But he's not, so he speaks to all of them and says in effect, "If the shoe fits, wear it." That's how I think we should read this passage. The warning is not a threat to everyone, but it is to some.

**The elaboration of an awful possibility—apostasy (4-6).** We have talked about apostasy a number of times recently, particularly in preaching through the book of Jude last May, as well as previous sermons on Hebrews. Apostasy is defined most simply as "the abandonment and rejection of the faith by someone once knowledgeable about it." Not every unbeliever is an apostate. Some are ignorant of what Christianity is all about; others are indifferent. But the apostate is knowledgeable and hostile.

Our passage indicates that it is possible for individuals who give every outward evidence of having been born again by faith in Jesus Christ to become apostate, i.e. to fall away and abandon the faith. I choose my words very carefully—"they give *every outward evidence*." I am not saying they are actually born again because there is no way of knowing another person's heart for certain. But looking at their lives they seem by all normal measuring standards to be God's people. Four such measurements are mentioned in the text:

- 1. They have once been enlightened**, i.e. the light of the gospel has broken in upon the darkness of their lives. This probably refers to their initial exposure to the Gospel or early instruction in Christian doctrine.
- 2. They have tasted the heavenly gift**, i.e. they have enjoyed the privileges that come with salvation, privileges like prayer, fellowship, and worship.
- 3. They have shared in the Holy Spirit**. I would assume this means they have experienced His conviction, His power, His teaching.
- 4. They have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age.**

They know that the Bible is a unique book that has satisfying answers for the hunger of the human heart, and they have seen things happen that can only be explained supernaturally.

Clearly the individuals being described here have had considerable involvement and experience with Christianity. Yet despite all of these evidences of true faith, these same people have fallen away. They have quit following Christ; they have stopped assembling together with other believers; they no longer pray; they have returned to their former lifestyle; they have become apostate. The Apostle John describes a similar situation that Jesus faced during His earthly ministry in John 6:66: “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.” They had been disciples; now they are no longer.

I think of some NT examples, like Demas, a valued disciple of Paul, who, because he loved this present world, eventually deserted Paul and apparently left the faith. I think of Judas, a man who walked with Christ for 3½ years—preaching, healing, casting out demons, and raising not the slightest doubt in the minds of any of the other Apostles that he was a genuine follower of Christ. But he fell away and Jesus Himself called him the Son of Perdition. I think of Simon the Sorcerer in Acts 8. We are told he “believed and was baptized,” but when he offered the apostles money in order to be able to impart the Holy Spirit to others, Peter denounced him and told him he was “captive to sin.” These examples should be sufficient to confirm what Hebrews 6:4-6 tells us—that apostasy is an awful possibility.

**The tragedy that results (from apostasy): there is *no* possibility of repenting again (4).** The Greek original reads literally that it is impossible “to renew toward repentance *again*,” implying that they had repented previously, at least outwardly. We’ll see in a moment why repentance is not repeatable, but for now please note that the author does not tell us it is *difficult* for apostates to repent; he says it is *impossible*. The term translated “impossible” appears three other times in Hebrews.

6:18: “it is impossible for God to lie.”

10:4: “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”

11:6: “without faith it is impossible to please God.”

In all of these cases the term clearly means that the thing being discussed cannot happen. So the only conclusion we can draw is that there are certain individuals who are beyond repentance.

Now this creates a problem, because evangelical preachers, myself included, have often said that no one is too sinful to be redeemed, and we have pointed to Moses and David and Paul as proof—each was a murderer, and David was an adulterer to boot! Such teaching is correct if what is meant is that there is no immoral deed, no addiction, no act so heinous that God is not willing to forgive if a person truly repents. Yet this passage interjects a truth we must come to grips with, namely that there are some who will not, indeed cannot repent. They have gone too far. In other words, there is an unpardonable sin. It’s not murder, it’s not adultery, it’s not child molestation; it’s not any particular action; rather it’s a heart condition called apostasy.

Why is apostasy unpardonable?

**The reason for this tragic consequence: it would entail re-crucifying Christ. (6).**

Verse 6: “It is impossible *because* they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and they are subjecting Him to public disgrace.” There is a sense in which every Christian, when he or she professes true faith in Christ, admits personal responsibility for nailing Jesus to the Cross. That’s part of saving repentance. We say, in effect, “my sin put him there, just as much as if I were one of those Roman soldiers pounding the nails into His hands or one of the Jewish crowd yelling, ‘Crucify Him!’”

So if anyone turns away from his profession of faith in Christ, denying Him and rejecting His grace, and then later comes back and makes that profession again, that would be tantamount to crucifying Jesus all over again and disgracing Him again, and God will not allow that! Another way to look at it is that there is nowhere else to go for repentance once one has rejected Christ. The apostate in effect has turned his or her back on the only means available for forgiveness before God.

But let me be clear. The “falling away” of which the author speaks is not just a momentary moral lapse, not a sin of passion, not some addiction we have failed to conquer, nor even a period of apathy or coldness in our relationship with God. Most of us have gone through periods like that. In fact, I have known some people who were backslidden for years (to use a term that isn’t very popular today but is still valid). Such failures can lead to apostasy, but they do not in and of themselves constitute it. The “falling away” spoken of here is the wilful sin of deliberate apostasy. The backslidden person can come home; the apostate cannot.

I would suggest to you that this impossibility of renewing the deliberate apostate has been verified repeatedly in history. Esau was probably an apostate. Later in the book of Hebrews we read,

*“See to it that no one misses the grace of God, . . . or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessings, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind (he found no place of repentance, KJV), though he sought the blessing with tears”* (Hebrews 12:15-17).

Judas was an apostate. He too was seized with remorse. He even threw the 30 pieces of silver for which he had sold Jesus onto the temple floor, admitting he had betrayed innocent blood. But suicide was the only way out of his misery, and it only relieved his misery in this life.

I had a professor in my graduate work in philosophy at Southern Methodist University who I suspect was an apostate. He was a graduate of Bob Jones University, perhaps the most conservative fundamentalist university in existence. After graduation he earned a doctorate in philosophy at a major university, and while there he turned his back on all that he had once professed. He became an atheist, but unlike many other agnostics and atheists on the faculty at SMU, he was militant in his antagonism toward anything Christian. I suspect that man sealed his own doom.

**An illustration from the world of nature (7,8).** He talks about two fields, making a point very similar to the parable of the soils, seed and Sower that Jesus told. The fields look the same, and they receive the same rain and the same sunshine. But one field is cultivated properly while the other is apparently neglected. One produces a useful crop while the other produces only worthless thorns and thistles. The former is blessed, the latter is burned. The difference is in what is produced.

The point seems to be that the real issue is not how we start out in the Christian life, not what kind of teaching we receive, nor what kind of outward profession we make; it's what we produce and how we finish the race. Millions make professions of faith in Christ, but how many of those are still identifying with Him when the journey is over?

I suspect some of you are probably whispering under your breath, "Just give me the bottom line: Can a person lose his salvation or not?" Hebrews 6 doesn't answer that question. However, there's an interesting parallel in 1 John 2 that may give us a hint. Speaking of some who had abandoned the faith, the Apostle says, "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us" (1 John 2:19).

But I would beg of you to forget the question, "Can a person lose his salvation?" because it is not a particularly useful question. You cannot know another person's heart. Nor do you need to. If God thought it was important for you to be able to answer that question, He would have made Heb. 6 a lot clearer than it is.

I would suggest instead that we should be asking some entirely different questions focusing on our own spiritual condition:

- “Am I maturing in my faith, or am I still talking baby-talk and drinking milk?
- Am I growing up or just growing old?
- Am I moving forward or am I falling back?
- Am I neglecting fellowship and accountability with other believers?
- Do I still enjoy reading the Word and praying and sharing my faith?
- Have I begun to drift away from the Lord?
- Am I dangerously near the point of no return?”

Now those are relevant questions. If you can say in your heart of hearts that you are maturing, growing, moving forward, and producing the fruit of repentance, then I don't believe you have to worry about becoming an apostate. I have often told people who came to me with fear in their hearts, "If you are worried about having committed the unpardonable sin, you probably haven't. Those who have don't worry about it."

But what about friends or family members who seem to have abandoned their faith? Pray for them, friends. Warn them. As long as they have breath you should plead for God's mercy. While our passage tells us there are those who have apostatized and cannot be renewed to repentance, we never know for sure who they are until they take their last breath.

Now I'm very grateful for the next part of our text, though I haven't left myself very much time to talk about it. After this dark and discouraging warning, Hebrews 6:9ff provides us with some much-needed good news.

**The good news: “We are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation.” (6:9-12)**

For the first and only time in the book the author refers to his congregation as “dear friends,” or “beloved ones.” Why here? Because he has just spoken some of the toughest words they will ever hear. Now he steps away from the pulpit, holds out his arms to them and says, “Even though I had to say these things, dear friends, I am confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation.”

Some have suggested that verse 9 proves the author was dealing with a merely hypothetical case in the previous paragraph, for here he denies that his audience is falling away. But that is a misreading of his intention. He is not saying that none of them are in danger; if that were the case, why would he even include the warning? Rather his goal is to motivate all of them to move in the right direction. He is smart enough to realize that while people need to be warned, they are best motivated by encouragement.

The author is like a football coach at halftime who rakes his team over the coals for the blunders in the first half that have put them behind. But just before they go out for the second half he gives them a pep talk and tells them he believes in them and they can win if they will give it 100%! Players who receive encouragement generally perform at a much higher level than those who are only criticized.

And the same is true in the spiritual realm. I have known churches where the entire tone from the pulpit is negative and critical, where the congregation is constantly rebuked and told that they don't measure up. If people were effectively motivated that way, such a church ought to be full of super-saints, but the opposite is usually the case—they are often depressed and defeated.

On the other hand, some pastors are well-known for using only the power of positive thinking. Everything is peaches and cream and love and hope, and people are never warned about the awful consequences of sin. That is equally dangerous. What we need is to be warned of the dangers but motivated by encouragement. So he tells them that despite the severe warning he has delivered, he is confident that their lives will produce spiritual fruit. And what is the basis for his confidence in these people? It is not that he believes in them, but rather that he believes in the character of their God. He reminds them that . . .

**God is not unjust; He will not forget the believer's work or love for Him. (10)** Look at verse 10: “God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.” While there may be some who remove themselves from God's grace by turning their backs on Christ and His free gift of salvation (the

apostates), God is not to blame. He never forgets even the smallest thing we do for Him or the smallest act of kindness we show His people.

Friends, what I think the author is saying here is that God is not looking for excuses to send people to hell. He's not looking to write you off for a momentary moral failure, or a besetting sin you have struggled with for years, or even a temporary lapse in your loyalty and commitment. Just the opposite—He is looking for the slightest evidence of faith and spiritual life so He can pour out His blessings on you.

Did you notice that the evidence of true faith that the author points to is not how many prayer meetings you have attended or Sunday School classes you have taught, or how much money you have given, but rather “the love you have shown Him as you have helped His people and continue to help them”? And did you also notice that deeds of kindness done to the people of God are reckoned as done to God Himself (verse 10)? It's the same message Jesus gave when He said that “inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me.”

Of course, we need to realize that good works cannot save us, as Josh made so clear last Sunday.

**Hope is made sure by perseverance (in the faith and in good works) to the very end. (11-12)** Verse 11: “We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.”

You've seen tickets to sports events that are perforated, and on the stub it says, “Not good if detached.” The stub by itself won't get you into the game, but its absence will keep you out. That's kind of how it is with good works. They won't by themselves get you into heaven—you must be born again by faith in Jesus Christ. But the absence of those works will keep you out, because their absence is evidence that your faith was not genuine.

**Conclusion:** I want to close with four key lessons we can glean from this very difficult passage—truths that I would suggest are indisputable:

1. Those who profess faith in Christ and then begin to fall away are in deep trouble. They have grave reason to fear for their eternal destiny, and they must be confronted with the spiritual peril they are facing.
2. Participation in the Christian community does not necessarily equal spiritual transformation. This fact puts a great deal of responsibility on us as parents and as Christian leaders to provide continual spiritual nourishment, to make disciples, not just converts.
3. True spirituality cannot be evaluated apart from fruitful faithfulness. Just because a person starts well, we cannot afford to assume that they will finish well. If one has truly been transformed, it will be manifest over a long span of time. We must take the “long look” at a person's life and reserve final judgments for the end of the race. <sup>ii</sup>

4. The Bible offers no assurance for the phony, the Pharisee, or the apostate, but every assurance is available to the true believer. And how do we know which we are? We cannot know each other's hearts, but we can know our own. The Holy Spirit witnesses with our spirit that we are the children of God. There is a settled peace and confidence that only the true believer can experience. If you do not enjoy that peace and confidence, I urge you not to rest for a moment until you have settled the issue with the Lord.

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i. These examples are similar to ones suggested by George H. Guthrie in his *Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary*, 232.

ii. These first three points are borrowed substantially from Guthrie.