

Communion Weekend

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[0 : 0 0] Hebrews chapter 6 and taking up the reading in verse 3 again, or verse 4 rather, 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 brings drinks in the rain, often falling on it, 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 as 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.

The question this evening is one which I suspect that most, if not all of us, have asked ourselves at some point in our Christian life. And that is this, can a true Christian lose his salvation?

Can a person who is a true follower of Jesus end up as not a follower of Jesus?

And this passage we've just read seems, notice I said seems, to suggest that we can lose our own salvation. Let's read it again. Those who have once been enlightened, those who have tasted the heavenly gift, those who have shared in the Holy Spirit, those who have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the coming age. Well, what is that but the description of a believer, a person who follows Jesus? And yet it goes on to say, if they fall away to be brought back to repentance, it's impossible if such a person falls away to be brought back to repentance because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again. And that's why you've possibly read this passage with dismay in the past, or perplexity or confusion at best because of what it seems to suggest. And you add to this passage other places in the Bible like Mark chapter 2 where Jesus warns against what he calls the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. And then he goes on to say that the person who is guilty of this blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not forgiven. You add to that first John, I can't remember exactly, some of you probably have noticed I was feverishly looking at my Bible. I was trying to do some last minute preparation during the last singing, which is always not a good thing. I was trying to find out that passage where it talks about the sin that leads to death. And John says, I'm not saying we should pray about that, but the sin that leads to death. You add all of these passages up together and it seems to suggest that it is possible to be a Christian one week and to be a non-Christian the next week or the next year. Add to that our own, I suppose you'd call it fears, the fears that we often entertain. What if I do fall away?

What if I do? Is it possible for me to do something? Is there some, something, is there some sin somewhere that I could possibly commit that I could possibly commit that would deprive me of the love of God?

[4 : 4 9] That would render me outside of the kingdom? That would result in me no longer being a follower of Jesus. You add to that the fear that we might have fooled ourselves into believing that we are Christians only to find out on the day of judgment that we're not. Jesus himself says, there are many who say to me, Lord, Lord. Many who will say on the day of judgment, we have preached in your name.

We have cast out demons in your name. We have done miracles in your name. And I will say to you, depart from me. I never knew you. You might say, well, I thought you were supposed to be encouraging us to sit at the Lord's table on Sunday. Why are you talking like this? Because the Bible is full of both encouragements and warnings.

And we have to take one with the other. We can't pick and choose when it comes to the Bible. We cannot just say, well, I'll choose the good bits, the bits that make me feel good about myself and ignore the rest. Life doesn't operate that way. I was coming up on the train right now from Edinburgh. It's all full of warnings. Mind the gap. Imagine people were to say, well, why are they always saying that? Isn't that depressing? Why are they saying, why are these awful warning bells that go off when the doors are closing? That's depressing. I don't want to hear it.

Well, they're there for a reason because the train company don't want us to be injured. God doesn't want us to be injured either. God puts the warnings in the Bible for our good, not so that we will despair, but so that we will remain focused on what he wants us to be focused on. And that's the purpose of this evening to focus our attention afresh. There is nothing wrong with asking, how am I doing as a Christian? Where am I as a Christian? Where am I on the road in following Jesus? And this is a passage that helps us, I hope, to locate where we are in following Jesus and to rediscover the difference between being a genuine follower and a fake follower. Because that's what this passage is all about.

It's a warning. And it's, but it's there not for our harm. It's there for our good and for our ultimate encouragement as long as we take our encouragement in the right thing. So I want us to look then this evening at this description, first of all, that the apostle makes of those who, when they fall away, find it impossible or for whom it is impossible to be brought back to repentance. That's the first thing I want us to do. Then the second thing I want us to do is to ask, well, what does it mean that they fall away? What is the nature of their falling away? And I think we'll discover that by that stage, that the nature of their faith is highly suspect in the first place. But in any case, let's look at the description that's given to us in verse four. He says, it is impossible for those who have once been enlightened. That's the first thing he says, once been enlightened. Then he goes on to say, who have tasted the heavenly gift. It's the second thing. Then they have shared in the Holy Spirit. And then they have tasted the goodness of the Word of

[9 : 04] God and the powers of the coming age. Now, remember what I said before, that at first sight, that description, it may appear to be that of a genuine believer in Jesus. But let's look at it again.

That person who has been enlightened, what does that mean? It's a person who has come to understand the gospel. Somebody who's come to see that in the gospel, God has spoken to us in the person of his Son and in the Bible, and indeed has come to conclude that the gospel is the truth, that without Jesus, there is no eternal life, and that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. That's what being enlightened means.

It's the difference between someone who is totally ignorant of what the gospel is and someone who knows what the gospel is. He knows that there is a God and that this person, Jesus of Nazareth, cannot be anyone else except the Messiah, because all the evidence is there. That person is enlightened.

And then that person has tasted the heavenly gift. That person has gone further. They have had a savor, a sample, a sample, if you like, of how good Jesus is. They've come so close to him that it's almost like that the reality of who he is has been absorbed, at least partly, by them. They've come to taste in the heavenly gift. They've shared in the Holy Spirit. They've taken part. They've participated in something. They've been drawn along. They've been drawn into something of the gospel, at least in a measure. And then they've tasted the powers of the coming age.

But do you notice that it is possible to fit that description only from the outside?

[11 : 36] And that's what I believe the apostle is talking about. He's talking about someone who has done all these things and experienced all these things. And yet you can't help thinking there's still something in the Holy Spirit. He's been enlightened or she has been enlightened. He or she has tasted the heavenly gift. He or she has shared in the Holy Spirit. But there's a sense in which it's only so far, isn't it?

It's not all the way. It's partial. It's in a measure. And they've even tasted the goodness of God, the word of God and the powers of the coming age.

And yet there appears to be something missing on the inside. And when you look at other parts of the Bible, other parts of the Bible back this up.

Like, for example, where Jesus says in John chapter 15, that chapter that describes the disciples as the branches and he is the true vine. Remember what he says? And this is just as disturbing as Hebrews chapter six. He says, I am the true vine and my father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes. So it's possible, it appears to be possible that for a branch in me attached to me to be cut off and destroyed. Even although from the outside it appeared as if that branch was every bit as much attached to Jesus as the other one. But it's only from the outside.

What needs to happen in this case, in order for the branch to bear fruit, and this is the all-important thing, isn't it? As we go on in this chapter, it makes it so clear. The all-important thing is the bearing of the fruit. The branch in me that doesn't bear fruit is cut off. In other words, the connection is only an outward one is only an outward one. It is a mechanical one. It's not a living connection to Jesus Christ. And it's the same here. There's a direct correlation between this chapter and John chapter 15.

[14 : 32] Every branch in me that bears no fruit is cut off and withers and it is destroyed. So this description, isn't it? Although it appears to bear all the hallmarks of a genuine believer in Jesus, doesn't go all the way, does it? It's like going into the shop, like going into Tesco or wherever you shop. And sometimes in Tesco you get these, they want you to buy a certain cheese that's just arrived from Switzerland or wherever. And they've got these wee bits of cheese on a plate.

And they're asking you to, they're inviting you to come and sample the cheese. And you go and you sample it and you think it's really nice. But that's only halfway. You've only sampled it. You haven't done anything. You've just tasted it. The real transaction would be for you to purchase the cheese.

That's what the intention is. And God's intention is not for us to simply sample Jesus us. And all his goodness and his truth and his majesty. God's intention is for us to commit ourselves 100% to him. That's what believing is all about. It's a surrender. Faith is when we forsake all and when we take Jesus alone as our Savior and as our Lord.

So what happens then if a person with only an outward partial connection to Jesus falls away? Well, he tells us if they fall away to be brought back, it's impossible 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. Now, what does this mean then?

What, what is, does that mean that it is impossible for a person once they have, once they have seen something of the gospel if they then wander away to ever be brought back again? Well, I don't believe that's what it means at all. Let's go into some of the things which I don't believe, but particularly in view of that. This is a, this is quite a perplexing passage and it's quite, it troubles many genuine Christians. Because if we don't understand it correctly, we get the impression that perhaps I was never a Christian in the first place and there perhaps is something that I might do that will render me outside of God's kingdom. That's not the purpose of this evening. The purpose of this evening is to encourage one another to focus our attention in the Lord Jesus Christ. But let's look at this. How does, how does a person like this fall away? Verse six, if they fall away to be brought back to repentance. First of all, it's not describing the person who drifts in our enthusiasm for the gospel or in our commitment to the faith. Those of us who have been on the road for many years know that there are good times and not so good times in the Christian life. There are highs and there are lows.

[18 : 34] There are times when we only rejoice and when our lives are so full of the Lord that we just don't want to hear or see anything else. But there are other times when God stretches our faith, when things happen in our lives, when circumstances change and when it appears that perhaps our expectations of the Christian life haven't been met along the way, we can become disappointed and we can be tempted to lose our enthusiasm for the gospel.

That's not who's being described here at all. Because God has his own way of re-infusing us. And that way is bringing us back to the Bible that reminds us of what it is that Jesus did for us. In the Bible, we get to see the big picture of the world in its entirety and where the world one day will end under the judgment of God. The world as we know it will not continue in its present form. God will bring it to nothing. He will destroy the world and he will judge the world.

And by faith, because our eyes have been opened, then we've been brought to see the truth of that coming day and we've been brought to run to Jesus for refuge and for our salvation.

It's not the person who drifts in his enthusiasm. Sometimes we are more enthusiastic about our salvation than others because we allow things to creep into our hearts and our lives that are harmful for us.

Once again, God has a way of rescuing us, of working in us and making us to see how empty and futile these things are and how great his gospel is. Neither is this verse describing the person who in a desperately low state, he comes to the conclusion that he can't be a Christian.

[21 : 05] There are some people, perhaps even some of us this evening, and you're tempted not to come to church tonight because you just feel that way. Maybe there's something specific that has happened or else just for other reasons or maybe not even any discernible reason. You just feel, I can't be a Christian. And when you see a verse like this, you think, well, that's me. Not necessarily.

Not necessarily. It might be tonight because you're simply feeling low. And the mind and the emotions are so complicated that sometimes, and of course, once the devil gets in and plays havoc with our thinking, he can lead us to all the wrong conclusions.

Don't listen to him. Tell him to get lost.

Don't listen to him. Because what your trust lies in is Jesus and him alone. So, this verse is not talking about the person who in circumstances where that person feels so low that they conclude that I can't be a Christian because I'm not good enough and I'm not, you know, as I look back over my life, I just see so little of what my life should have. No. Our salvation does not depend on our performance.

I'm not saying that obedience isn't important. Every one of us should be encouraged this evening to, as we rediscover the steadfast love of God, the deep, deep love of Jesus to go out in his name, and to put his gospel into practice in our daily lives. Every one of us should be encouraged that way.

[23 : 11] But our salvation doesn't depend on the degree to which we perform. Our salvation depends only on that love that we've been singing about.

Our salvation depends only on the cross. On the cross. On Jesus Christ. I am crucified with Christ, Paul says. I am crucified with Christ. He alone is my hope and he alone is my salvation.

So look to him. And to him alone. What I think that the apostle is describing here, if you're familiar with the letter to the Hebrews, you'll know that Moses figures heavily in this letter. The Israelites going through the wilderness, the tabernacle and all the furniture that went in the tabernacle and the sacrifices and all the rest of it.

I believe that the writer is once again talking about the children of Israel in the desert. Because if you look at it in that light, all of a sudden things begin to fall into place.

The children of Israel, when they were brought out of Egypt, they went into the desert under the leadership of Moses. Remember? Were they all believers? No, they weren't.

[24 : 45] But they all followed the light that God provided for them, which was actually himself. They all enjoyed the benefits of being within the covenant people of God.

They tasted the heavenly gift. They literally tasted it. The manna in the wilderness was the heavenly gift. God's provision of food for his people. Everyone tasted it. Otherwise they starved.

But everyone tasted it. Did that mean that everyone was a true believer in God, in the God of Israel? It actually didn't. There were some within the ranks of Israel who turned out to be not believers at all.

Astonishingly, one of the most astonishing facts of the Bible is, how could you be amongst the Israelites and not be a true believer in the God of Israel?

I find that quite astonishing. Anyway, there were some. They tasted in the heavenly gift. They shared in the Holy Spirit. It was God himself that led the people, the pillar of fire by day and the cloud by day and the fire by night.

[26 : 06] It was God himself whose voice they heard on the mountain. They knew perfectly well that God was in their midst. What else? They tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age.

They knew that God's promise was that he was leading them to the promised land, to the land of Canaan. The land that he had promised Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. They knew.

And yet, some of them rebelled against Moses and ultimately against God. Why was that? Because somehow, the more they saw of God, the more they resented him.

And the more they hated him. They drifted away in their hearts. And that's the warning. Because it's possible to hear God's word. To be aware of the being and the reality of God.

And even to be aware of the reality of Jesus Christ. It happened all the time during his lifetime. The Pharisees, they knew perfectly well who he was. He couldn't be anyone else.

[27 : 18] No one had the power to do the miracles that he did, except, and that's what Nicodemus said, no one could have the power to do what you do, unless God is with him. And yet, these very same people who knew their Bibles back to front. They were the very ones who plotted his downfall.

They were the very ones who demanded his crucifixion. Repentance wasn't on their agenda. That's what should have happened. That's what happened with the disciples.

Peter, James, and John. They saw Jesus and they bowed in worship and in adoration and in trust and faith.

They were genuine believers. Because they responded to the person of Jesus. But the Pharisees and the religious leaders, or at least most of them, they went the other way.

They went the other way. They turned against him. The more they saw, the more they hated, the more they resented, and the more they were determined to crucify Jesus. And that's what he means in verse 6 when he says they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. So, I think you can see that there's a very clear wedge being driven against those, between those who responded to the person of Jesus in faith and commitment, those who departed from him and were ultimately guilty of crucifying him out of hatred and resentment.

[29 : 17] They all saw the same evidence. They saw the same thing. Two different responses to the same privilege.

And sometimes it's when we see the contrast, when we're brought afresh to the contrast, that our faith is actually reinforced. Remember when Naomi said to Ruth and Orpah, remember how Naomi had gone to live in Moab and her two sons had married Moabite women. And it was now time the two sons, of course, had died along with Naomi's husband and they were coming back and they were on the border.

And Orpah decided to go back. And Naomi said to Ruth, well, you might as well go back with her. It's your people. There, Moab is your land. It's your culture. It's your father. And you'll probably find a new husband there. And it was when Ruth saw the contrast, when she saw what it meant for her sister-in-law to actually depart from what she now believed to be the glorious truth of the living and true God.

And she said, no way. When she saw the contrast, she said, I'm not going to leave you. Because she had come to believe in the truth of the God of Israel. And so what this chapter is, it presents us with a contrast between those who appear because they have in a measure sampled the goodness of the gospel, but fallen away. They've drifted away into hatred and resentment.

It reinforces for us this evening, what true faith actually is. And it's for that reason that the writer says this, even though we speak like this verse nine, dear friends, we are confident of better things. And so are we tonight. Why are we confident of better things?

[31 : 36] Because we have come to believe exclusively in the Lord Jesus Christ and what he has done for us. And it is that trust and that faith that draws us to him afresh this evening. And over the course of this weekend, we're going to discover afresh what the cross meant in the removal of our sin and in a reconciliation to God through the person of Jesus Christ.

And all the way, there is this one question, what does Jesus alone mean to you?

That's what the writer is getting at. That's what he finally will say in chapter 10 when he says, we have a great high priest. Therefore, let us come with boldness and confidence, knowing that our sin has been forgiven and knowing that our hope rests in Jesus and in Jesus alone. Let's bow in prayer.

Our Father in heaven, we bless you for the great gospel that we have come to believe by the power of the Holy Spirit. And we pray that as we reflect on what we love with all our heart, despite all our sinfulness and our failure, we ask, Lord, that you will forgive that sin afresh, that you will draw us afresh into a renewed understanding of what Jesus did for us and a renewed strengthening of our faith and our love for you. In Jesus name. Amen.