

Does Hebrews 6:6 Teach that Apostasy is Without Remedy?

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Introduction: Is Apostasy Without Remedy?

One of the more controversial passages in Scripture is found in **Hebrews 6:4-8**, where the writer of Hebrews appears to teach that a Christian who falls away from the faith (i.e., apostatizes) can never regain his salvation again (notice in particular vs. 6):

"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, 5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 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. 7 For ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; 8 but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned."

This passage is one of many in the New Testament that suggests that a person's salvation can be forfeited. Rather than defend that point here, I will assume that this is indeed what the passage teaches (for an extensive treatment of this topic, see Robert Shank, *Life in the Son: A Study in the Doctrine of Perseverance*, 2nd Ed., Springfield, MO: Westcott Publishers, 1960, 1961). I want to focus here instead on the question of whether this passage actually teaches that salvation, once forfeited, can never be regained. This question has a great deal of relevance to any who believe that they have indeed passed through a period of apostasy from the faith but now have recognized their rebellion and wish to return to Christ. Is such a return impossible?

Given what we know from the rest of Scripture, it would be somewhat surprising if this passage indeed taught that apostasy is without remedy, for there is a strong emphasis throughout the Bible on God's willingness to extend salvation to any and all who seek it in Christ. Consider, for example, Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, one of the main points of which is that God's patience is great, and that he stands ready to welcome home the repentant sinner. Likewise, the following promises from the Sermon on the Mount emphasize God's readiness to respond to those who seek him:

"Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened." (Mt 7:7-8)

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." (Mt 5:6)

Such promises suggest that there is a possibility of salvation for anyone, even an apostate, as long as the person sincerely wishes to draw near to God. As James reminds us, if you "draw near to God" he will "draw near to you" (James 4:8).

One possible way to harmonize such promises as these with Hebrews 6:6 would be to affirm the above assurances that God will accept anyone who sincerely comes to him in repentance, but at the same time argue that this principle is irrelevant to the case of apostates because, as Hebrews 6:6 might be taken to suggest, apostates are simply unable to ever come again to God in repentance. Because they are unable to do so, they in fact never do so, thus no contradiction arises between the impossibility of reconversion assumed to be taught in Hebrews 6:6 and the responsiveness of God to the repentant taught elsewhere in Scripture. According to this hypothesis, apostates, once having apostatized, simply never again "ask . . . seek . . . knock," nor

are they able to ever again "hunger and thirst for righteousness" or "draw near to God;" consequently, the above promises do not come into play.

This solution runs into difficulties on at least two grounds, however. One is the problem of experience. Though there is no way, of course, to know how many people who were at one time genuine believers subsequently reject the faith but at a later point in life return to a vibrant faith in Christ, there is a general sense, at least, that this sequence of events does occur in some instances.

There is as well a second, more important, problem with the understanding of Hebrews 6:6 proposed above. Namely, it appears that we can find a number of examples of conversion, followed by apostasy, and subsequent reconversion portrayed in the Bible itself. Robert Shank (Life in the Son, Chp. XIX) discusses at least six cases of this sort found in Scripture. I will take a moment to discuss several of these here, elaborating as necessary on Shank's remarks.

Consider first the case of the Galatian Christians, some of whom Paul said had "fallen from grace" and (to put it even more forcefully) had "been severed from Christ" (cf. John 15:2a, 6) because they were "seeking to be justified by law" (5:4). Yet, as Shank observes, Paul "assumes that the erring Galatians may be restored and is therefore willing to 'travail in birth again until Christ be formed in [them]' (4:19), as once [Paul] did in leading them to their original conversion to Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:15)" (Shank, p. 313). Paul's language here strongly suggests that he viewed the Galatians in question as having once been in union with Christ, then severed from that union with Christ, but now facing the potential for a new spiritual birth by which their union with Christ could be once again restored.

Another example of this sort mentioned by Shank can be found in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, where Paul exhorts the Corinthian church to excommunicate one of its unrepentant members guilty of incest, "that [the member's] spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (vs. 5). Clearly the goal of excommunication in this instance was eventual restoration and the salvation of the man's soul, a goal which we may conclude from 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 was realized (assuming the same man is in view in both passages). Of course, this example supports the potential for apostasy and subsequent reconversion only if we can be sure that the man in question was truly a believer in the first place, and that he truly apostatized. Establishing the second point in this case is easier than establishing the first point. Paul refers to the guilty man as merely a "so-called brother" (1 Corinthians 5:11) and a "wicked man" (5:13), strongly suggesting that Paul did not consider him a true brother at that time (cf. Paul's comments on the status of immoral people in 6:9-10). This does not tell us, however, whether Paul believed that the man was a true brother prior to his sin of incest. And yet, clearly the man had been active in the life of the church to the extent that Paul considered him an insider, one who was "among" them (5:1) and "in [their] midst" (5:2), a member of the "whole lump" that comprised the Corinthian church (5:6), and one who was "within" the church (hence, under the church's spiritual authority) in contrast to an "outsider" (5:12). Though we cannot be for sure, such expressions lend credibility to the possibility that the man mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 was at an earlier time a genuine Christian who subsequently experienced apostasy, yet for whom Paul held out the hope of eventual restoration to salvation.

Another likely example discussed by Shank (pp. 314-315) as showing the potential for restoration after apostasy is found in Paul's warning to the Corinthian church in 2 Corinthians 12:21. In this passage "Paul expressed fear that, should he return to Corinth, he should be obliged to 'bewail' (pentheo, a term of mourning as for the dead) many who had sinned flagrantly and had not repented" (Shank, pp. 314-315). It is important to keep in mind that Paul viewed the unrepentant practice of such willful sins (i.e., "impurity, immorality and sensuality," 12:21) to be a clear sign of an inner attitude of allegiance to the flesh that is incompatible with faith in Christ (compare 12:21 to 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and especially Galatians 5:19-21). All of the evidence points to the fact that Paul considered these particular unrepentant members of the Corinthian church to be spiritually dead and void of a relationship with Christ, a possibility which in 2 Corinthians 13:5 Paul exhorts them to consider in regard to themselves ("Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you--*unless*

indeed you fail the test?). Despite their dire condition, however, Paul still held out hope for them. The import of Paul's warning in 12:21 (cf. also 13:7-10) is that repentance and restoration to salvation was still possible for them if they would heed his warning and return to Christ.

Though as with the case of the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 we cannot be absolutely sure that those said to have practiced immorality in 2 Corinthians 12:21 were ever genuine believers prior to their visible apostasy, the context of 2 Corinthians chapters 11-13 suggests that they were. In 11:2 Paul says that in his earlier ministry to the Corinthians he had "betrothed them to one husband . . . Christ." The question at hand then is whether there is any reason to exclude the "many who have sinned" in 12:21 from the ones "betrothed to Christ" in 11:2. I can find no good reason in the text to do so. That is, there is no indication in the text between 11:2 and 12:21 that Paul has shifted his intended audience. It seems to me that the most natural reading throughout this extended passage is that all of his intended readers (both those still in the faith and those mentioned in 12:21 as having already apostatized) are included among the original group who had been "betrothed to Christ" under Paul's earlier ministry. If so, then the fact that Paul held out hope for the eventual restoration of these apostates (perhaps even before his arrival in Corinth; 13:1, 10) suggests that apostasy from the faith is not without remedy for those willing to repent and return to Christ.

Shank discusses several other examples of passages suggesting the possibility of restoration after apostasy, including Romans 11:20-23, James 5:19-20, and Revelation 3:14-22. Rather than take the time to examine all of these passages, let me close this section by simply noting one additional example that Shank fails to mention. In 1 Timothy 1:19-20, Paul speaks of Hymenaeus and Alexander as examples of men who had "rejected . . . faith and a good conscience" and had as a result "suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith." The Greek term *apotheto* translated as "rejected" is a strong term (cf. its usage in Romans 11:1-2), indicating a "a strong, deliberate thrusting away" (A. Duane Litfin, "1 Timothy," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, Eds., Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-1985) and in combination with the imagery of a shipwreck clearly indicates that Hymenaeus and Alexander had fully abandoned their faith in Christ. At the same time, Paul goes on to say that he had "delivered [them] over to Satan, so that they may be taught not to blaspheme" (1:20). The wording here is reminiscent of 1 Corinthians 5:5, where Paul stated his intention in regard to the man guilty of incest to "deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." Clearly Paul's motivation in that instance was remedial rather than merely penal or vindictive, and we can safely assume that the same was also the case in 1 Timothy 1:20 in regard to Hymenaeus and Alexander. It is evident, then, that Paul did not view these two apostates as being beyond the reach of God's restoring grace. Paul's hope was that through the suffering inflicted on them by Satan as God's instrument of discipline, they might yet repent of their blasphemy and return to faith in Christ.

The above examples are perhaps sufficient to make the point that we should not too quickly assume that Hebrews 6:6 teaches that apostasy is without remedy. How, then, are we to interpret Hebrews 6:6? In the remainder of this essay I would like to offer an interpretation of Hebrews 6:6 that draws heavily on the context of the passage in which this verse is found. The observations I will make lead me to conclude that Hebrews 6:6 does not in fact teach that apostasy is without remedy. This conclusion is in keeping with the examples of restoration following apostasy discussed above, as well as with the experience of the Church that some individuals who at one time have fallen away from the faith do in fact at a later time return to an active repentance and a genuine faith in Christ.

An Examination of Hebrews 6:6 Within Its Context

If we are to arrive at a proper interpretation of Hebrews 6:6, it is imperative that we give more careful consideration to the context of this verse than has often been the case among commentators. In chapter five the writer of Hebrews has been discussing some of the details of

Jesus' qualifications as our high priest. Then, in 5:11 he pauses to rebuke his readers for their "dull[ness] of hearing" that prevents him from being able to discuss more fully these deeper truths of the "word of righteousness" (vs. 13), deeper truths that he characterizes as "solid food," in contrast to the "milk" or "elementary principles of the oracles of God" (vs. 12) that his readers need.

What do the "elementary principles" include? The writer details several important examples in 6:1-2, a list of which is (significantly) headed by "repentance from dead works." Note also that the writer raises the issue of having to re-teach these elementary principles. In 5:12 he twice states that his readers need to be taught again (Greek: *palin* 'again') the foundational principles (which we know from 6:1 includes as a major element the principle of repentance). In 6:1 he exhorts his readers not to be satisfied with simply "laying again (Greek: *palin*) a foundation of repentance . . .," but to "press on to maturity" and begin delving into deeper teachings (i.e., the "solid food" of 5:12, 14) of the sort that he has been touching on in this epistle.

It is in this context that the writer then issues his warning against apostasy in 6:4-6, with the added comment that it is "impossible to renew them [apostates] again (Greek: *palin*) to repentance." By now we can see a pattern emerging:

- 5:12 "you have need again (*palin*) for someone to teach you the elementary principles .."
- 6:1 "not laying again (*palin*) a foundation of repentance . . ."
- 6:6 "it is impossible to renew them again (*palin*) to repentance . . ."

There is a clear parallel between the writer's statement in 6:6 and his previous statements in 5:12 and 6:1 about his readers' need to start over and be taught again (Greek: *palin*) the elementary "milk" principles of repentance, etc. Consistency, therefore, demands that we interpret the writer's comments in 6:6 about "renewing to repentance" in terms of the same *reinculcation or reinstruction* in repentance found in the preceding verses. That is, the "renewal" that the writer has in mind refers to a *return to or repetition of instruction in the fundamentals of the faith*, most notably instruction regarding the necessity of repentance, where "repentance" may be seen as representative of the longer list of "elementary principles" of the faith listed in 6:1-2.

What then does the writer to the Hebrews mean when he says that it is "impossible" (6:6) in the case of apostates to return to such instruction in the fundamentals of the faith? Keep in mind that throughout this epistle the writer warns his readers against becoming "hardened" (4:7), "dull of hearing" (5:11), and "sluggish" (6:12). Moreover, recall that the section in which this particular warning against apostasy occurs began in 5:11-12 with an expression of the writer's concern over this very thing (i.e., that his readers were beginning to grow dull in receptivity to spiritual truth and were unable to accept "solid food"). But whereas the writer to the Hebrews viewed his general audience to this epistle as having grown only partially dull in their sensitivity to spiritual truth, he presents the case of apostates in 6:6 as an example (and a warning) to his readers of where this process of hardening may eventually lead. The apostate is one who has followed the process of hardening and ever-increasing dullness through to completion. Through persistent disobedience (4:11) the apostate's spiritual receptivity to truth has become virtually nil, with the result that as long as he continues in such rebellion he cannot be successfully taught (i.e., he will not be receptive to instruction in) even the elementary principles of the faith (most importantly, repentance), not to mention the more advanced "solid food" that the writer to the Hebrews wished his readers to receive.

There is a comparison drawn in this passage, then, between the apostate, who has reverted to a state of spiritual hardness in which he is at present unable (i.e., it is "impossible" for him) to receive even the fundamentals of the faith, and the partially "dull of hearing" Christian, who though he still embraces the fundamentals of the faith, is presently unable (i.e., it is equally impossible for him) to understand or accept the deeper "word of righteousness" (5:13) or "solid food" of the faith. The writer draws this comparison as a warning to his readers that they must address their increasing dullness before it reaches the extreme point of apostasy (cf. Hebrews 3:12-4:1). This was a very real danger, for the readers of this epistle had not merely stagnated in their spiritual receptivity, but had already started on a downward track of increasing dullness, as

indicated by the writer's statement that they "have become" (NASB, from the Greek *gegotate*, perfect active indicative of *ginomai*, 'to become') dull of hearing (5:11) and "have come" (NASB, again from the Greek *gegotate*) to need milk rather than solid food (5:12). This use of *gegotate* "have (be)come" in both of these instances suggests a progression from earlier not being dull and in need of milk to their present state of partial dullness in which they can accept only milk. The writer of this epistle was justifiably concerned that this progression, if left unchecked, could eventually lead to a complete hardening and apostasy from the faith. Thus, he issues the warning in 6:4-6.

Now, the crucial question to which all of this leads is as follows: If Hebrews 6:6 should be interpreted as I have outlined above, does this mean that apostasy is beyond remedy? Not at all. The present inability of apostates to accept instruction in even the "elementary principles" or "milk" (5:12) of the faith does not preclude them from ever being able to do so in the future, anymore than the present inability of the partially "dull of hearing" Christians to accept "solid food" (5:12-14) permanently precludes them from being able to heed the writer's warnings and be receptive to such "solid food" in the future. In each case there is a type of spiritual food ("milk" on the one hand, "solid food" on the other) that the group in question (full apostates on the one hand, dull Christians on the other) is presently unable to receive, and in neither case is there reason to believe that this present inability equals permanent inability. I do not mean, of course, that apostates can free themselves from the prison of spiritual deadness on their own. Just as in the case of those who have never believed in the first place, God's grace is required to draw the apostate back to Christ (John 6:44). My point here is simply that we cannot conclude from Hebrews 6:6 that God is unwilling to extend such grace to the apostate. What is "impossible" at present (in the case of either apostates or dull Christians) need not be "impossible" in the future, if the recipient of God's grace is willing to respond to that grace and allow God to open up once again his sensitivities to spiritual truth.

This interpretation is compatible with two details found in the text following the writer's statement in 6:6a that it is "impossible to renew [apostates] to repentance." Between this statement and the following statement that apostates "again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame," most English translations supply some form of clausal connector such as "since" (NASB), "because" (NIV), or "seeing that" (KJV). However, it is important to note that no such word(s) occurs in the Greek text; instead, the relation between the first and second clauses of 6:6 must be derived from the overall syntax of the sentence rather than from a single lexical item. The syntax would just as readily allow the reading "while" (supplied as an alternative reading in the margins of both the NASB and NIV). Indeed, the present participle status of the two Greek verbs *anastaurountas* 'crucifying again' and *paradeigmatidzontas* 'exposing publicly' in the second clause of 6:6 (cf. NIV) can be seen as favoring the "while" reading. This result accords well with the conclusion reached above that apostasy is not necessarily beyond remedy. That is, the apostate's inability to receive instruction in the elementary principles of the faith necessarily holds only as long as (i.e., only "while") the apostate persists in his willful rejection of faith in the Son of God, by which he is at present "crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace" (NIV

There is a second detail in 6:8 that supports the conclusion that apostasy is not without remedy. At the close of the writer's agricultural metaphor in 6:7-8 likening the apostate to a cultivated field that produces only "thorns and thistles," the writer states that such an unproductive field "is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned." Though the last statement that "it ends up being burned" may seem to carry an irrevocable finality, the writer's preceding statement that it is "close to being cursed" (NIV, "is in danger of being cursed," from the Greek *kataras eggus*, 'curse-near') suggests a window of hope that this ultimate judgment will necessarily obtain only in the event that the apostate persists in his present attitude of rebellion (cf. Shank, *Life in the Son*, p. 319).

These observations accord, then, with the conclusion reached above that apostasy is not necessarily without remedy. This does not mean that the apostate, like the unregenerate person more generally, may not pass a "point of no return" where God's Spirit will no longer extend the

grace required to draw him to Christ. Many believe that the unpardonable sin of "blasphemy against the Spirit" represents such a point of no return (Matthew 12:31-32), and there are other possible descriptions of a point of no return in Scripture where God ceases to strive with the one who persists in hardness of heart (see Shank, *Life in the Son*, pp.310-311 for some discussion of this point). I would argue, however, that Hebrews 6:6, when considered within its context as I have done so above, should not be understood as precluding the possibility of restoration after apostasy. Though many individual apostates may indeed persist in their rebellion to a point at which God finally ceases to extend his wooing grace to them, it is not the case that apostasy in and of itself represents a uniform point of no return for all those who experience it.