

Hebrews 6:4-6: Impossible Repentance?

By Tom Wacaster

The passage now before us describes a state of apostasy from the faith so severe that it is said to be “impossible” to bring a person again to repentance. The writer is about to enter into a description of a class of once faithful Christians who had rejected Christ as High Priest, and had instead returned to their previous state under the old Mosaic Law. In these few verses we get a glimpse of their *past*, *present*, and *future*. It is this future spiritual state wherein the author says, “it is impossible to renew them again unto repentance,” that poses the difficulty. Consider the following.

Their Past **(6:4-5)**

The advocates of the false doctrine of the impossibility of apostasy would have us to believe that the author of Hebrews was presenting a mere hypothetical case that could not and would not happen to a real Christian. Listen again to the description of those of whom the inspired writer is speaking: “For as touching those who were once enlightened, and tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted of the age to come” (Heb. 6:4-5). If the author is not describing a faithful child of God then I am at a loss as to the meaning of words. Space does not allow me to elaborate upon each of the phrases used by the author, but whether taken separately or collectively, they simply cannot be referring to anyone other than a faithful child of God. Such was their *past*.

Their Present **(6:6a)**

With four words the author moves from their past to their

present: “*and then fell away.*” Attempts to soften the message of the inspired writer are totally inadmissible. Our English translates the Greek ‘*parapipto,*’ meaning “to fall beside...In the Scriptures to fall away (from the true faith)...Heb. 6:6” (Thayer). This passage is a real warning against a real danger. To deny this is to make void the purpose of this inspired letter. In short the entire book of Hebrews becomes an exercise in futility and can be likened to a man in a dark cellar with no light looking for a black cat that isn’t there. Why would God spend the time in solemnly warning the people to beware lest they be lost if, in fact, it is impossible that they can be lost?

Their Future **(6:6b)**

Focus on the word “impossible.” In an attempt to deal with the difficulty, some have softened the language so as to make the passage mean, “it is difficult.” But the Greek word here translated “impossible” is ‘*adunaton.*’ It occurs ten times in the New Testament, including three other passages in Hebrews (6:18; 10:4; and 11:6). In all other places the word plainly means nothing less than “absolutely impossible,” and that must be its meaning in 6:6 also. The apostle is warning of state of apostasy so severe and so final as to make it absolutely impossible to bring that lost soul back to a saved relationship with God. In light of other passages that teach that God can, and will forgive virtually any sin we might commit so long as we have obeyed the gospel and continue to walk in the light, how might we harmonize what is said here with such promises of hope?

First, if these Christians abandoned the system of Christianity and went back under the old system of things, it would be impossible for them to be brought to repentance and salvation under that system. This interpretation is certainly in keeping with the context of this letter.

Second, there is the danger of harboring a hardened heart. The scriptures plainly teach that it is possible for one to live in sin for so long a time that he finally hardens his heart beyond the point of recovery. Consequently his heart can no longer be touched by the sweet message from God (cf. 2 Pet. 2:14; 1 Tim. 4:1-4). While it is hard to imagine such a state of depravity and hardness of heart, it is nonetheless true that one can become so overwhelmed by sin that the gospel can no longer reach his heart. Such a state of impossibility is due to the unwillingness of men, not the inability of God!

These Hebrew brethren were in danger of placing themselves in a situation wherein it is impossible to be restored. While it is true that God will forgive any sin we confess (1 John 1:8-9), these brethren had evidently reached a spiritual state where they could no longer be stirred to repentance, "*seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh.*" So long as they remained in this state of rejection and rebellion, it was impossible to renew them to repentance.