

The Impossibility of Repentance: An Examination of Hebrews 6:4-6

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ABSTRACT

One warning passage in the NT is Heb 6:4-6, which declares the impossibility of repentance for those who apostatized. This study evaluates the passage by employing biblical exegesis and proposes an understanding consistent with its context. This study employed documentary library research, making use of Greek language tools and other literature that are related to this study. Its purpose is to propose an understanding of the passage consistent with the concept that genuine believers can fall from grace. This study concludes that the referents of 6:4-6 are genuine believers who apostatized. Their genuine faith is attested by the participles in the passage. Their impossibility of genuine repentance is due to their deliberate, continual rejection of Jesus Christ.

Keywords: repentance, impossibility, enlightened, Holy Spirit, Son of God, crucify, apostasy

INTRODUCTION

Heb 6:4-6 is considered a problematic section of the book. This passage has evoked scholars' attention and remains “puzzling and enigmatic” (Matthewson, 1999). The main problem that is endeavored to answer is, what makes terminal the apostasy of those once enlightened? This study aims to examine the apparent terminal apostasy in Heb 6:4-6 and suggest an interpretation consistent with the context and linguistic analysis of the passage. The immediate and broader context are included in the study as necessary to provide a background and further light regarding the problem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following studies reviewed have deduced their arguments from the literary context, OT background, and some thematic elements echoed in the passage. McKnight (1992) did a seminal study in which he made a synthetic analysis of the warning passages in Hebrews. Based on his phenomenological-true-believer view, he states that the warnings are real and were given to genuine believers “who can genuinely commit the sin” or can forfeit their faith and salvation (pp. 23-25). By examining elements of the warnings (i.e., exhortation, consequence, sin, and audience) and analyzing the words and syntax of the passages, he says that the predominant concern is the “drastic consequences of eternal damnation if a person does not persevere in the faith.” The sin

that destroys faith is apostasy which is a "deliberate and public act of deconfessing Jesus Christ, a rejection of God's Spirit, and a refusal to submit to God and His will" (p. 54). This work is almost quoted in every study on the same passage. Yet he fails to treat the word *ἀδύνατον* in his detailed grammatical analysis of vv. 4-6 which, in my view, is a significant element of the problem.

Mathewson (1999) examines 6:4-6 in light of the OT. He suggests that 6:4-6 echoes and alludes by the Kadesh-Barnea wandering of the Hebrews (Num 13-14 and Ps 95). Out of his thematic and verbal comparisons, he posits that the audience of Hebrews "have experienced the blessings of vv. 4-6 by virtue of belonging to the new covenant community," and those who "fail to appropriate these blessings and obey will be cursed" (pp. 221, 222). By analogy, he concludes that the "people depicted in 6:4-6 are *not genuine believers* or true members of the covenant community" (p. 224) which is analogous to the hardhearted and rebellious Hebrew people in the wilderness. Further concludes that the "falling away (v. 6) is not a falling from salvation, but a failure to exercise saving faith in light of the blessings to which the readers have been exposed through association with the Christian community" (p. 224, 225). Mathewson's ability to see the connection of 6:4-6 with the wandering at Kadesh-Barnea is noteworthy yet it poses some concerns. The immediate context of the passage has no hint of the Kadesh-Barnea experience but on the Melchizedek priesthood that Jesus took (4:14-5:11) and the believers' faithful labors and God's purpose in Christ (6:1-20).

Emmrich (2003) exegetes 6:4-6 through a pneumatological approach, which, like Mathewson, is anchored on OT background. At the outset, he admits the difficulty, particularly the relationship of second *μετάνοια* and *ἀδύνατος* in 6:4a. He asserts that 6:4-6 "revolves around the *realized* blessings of the eschaton already enjoyed by the community" which "entails tremendous responsibility" (p. 89). He argues that based on Hebrews, the "gift of *πνεῦμα* . . . does not appear to be final. Redemption in Hebrews is presented as a to-be-maintained dialogue . . . and there is no such thing here as 'eternal security' apart from the believer's cooperation in cultivating the divine means of grace" (p. 90). To him, the falling away is apostasy, in which the salvific work of the Holy Spirit to a person has now terminated due to the termination of the person's Christian pilgrimage. He is right on the active role of the Holy Spirit in faith. However, it appears that the passage's context does not deal with the work of the Spirit.

Another study on 6:4-6 is by Davis (2008) in light of the oral critical method. He states that the NT world, being an oral world, is characterized by redundant and agonistic overtones that fit the structure of Hebrews. He observes that in 6:4-6 the author did not include himself by the use of "we" like in other warning passages. Instead, the author employs a third person plural—"they, those, them." Davis asserts that the subjects of 6:4-6 are the ones that "have stopped growing—they are not being mature" (p. 763). Further, he says that the impossibility "does not deal with the audience's returning to repentance, but with the author's ability to bring them to repentance" (p. 765). In other words, "the warning does not refer to salvation, but to the audience's reliance on what the author can do for them" (p. 765) to repent. In such a condition, "if they fall away, they are *on their own* in returning to God" (p. 765). The idea that the warning has nothing to do with salvation but with the inability of the author of Hebrews to restore the believers to repentance is an interesting new insight. On the other hand, what the author of Hebrews says he can do if God permits (6:3) is the "beginning of the word of Christ" (v. 1: *τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον*) and not to lead the believers to repentance.

Peterson (2008) builds up his conclusion on 6:4-6 from his critical analysis of certain scholars who have done remarkable studies on the passage. Out of his analysis, he concludes that

the author of Hebrews is warning a "group of professing Christians not to depart from Christ" for "he fears that some might commit apostasy" (p. 43). Thus, falling away is the sin of apostasy that may be committed by some members of the covenantal community—the "unfaithful members" (p. 43). Peterson points out that 10:39 has been missed out by scholars in connection to 6:4-6. But he too fails to provide a considerable connection with 6:4-6.

Finally, McAfee (2014) examines 6:4-6 through the blessings and curses of the covenant theme. Out of his study, he concludes that Heb 6 deals with "legitimate covenant members who have actually received the inaugural blessings of the new covenant reality through the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit. What remains . . . is their perseverance" (p. p. 548). McAfee considers the sin in this passage as a "high-handed sin of apostasy" that "invokes the covenant curse of individual separation from the life of the covenant community" (p. 551). Thus, the falling away refers to the "possibility that an individual in a covenant relationship with God can be deliberate unfaithfulness to the covenant be excluded from that relationship" (p. 552). This, to McAfee, results in eternal destruction. He espouses the notion that the sin of apostasy entailed in 6:4-6 is final and beyond the atoning forgiveness of Christ.

Thus, there is general agreement on the gravity and graveness of falling away by those who have been enlightened and tasted the heavenly. That the meaning of falling away in Heb 6:6 is apostatizing from the orthodox teachings received. But there is ambiguity on what makes the apostasy a hopeless condition.

METHODS

This study employs the interpretive process of the historical-grammatical method of biblical exegesis, which affirms the Bible's inspiration. The process begins with the historical and literary contexts, followed by the text analysis, focusing on the structure, word study, grammar, and syntax of the passage and its theological implications before the conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section of the study deals with the text and its best reading from Greek, its translation, and the analysis of its historical and literary context.

Text and Translation

This pericope has no variant readings from the ancient manuscripts of Hebrews. Thus the Greek text of Heb 6:4-6 is read as follows:

(4) αδυνατον γαρ τους απαξ φωτισθεντας, γευσαμενους τε της δωρεας της επουρανιου και μετοχους γενηθεντας πνευματος αγιου (5) και καλον γευσαμενους θεου ρημα δυναμεις τε μελλοντος αιωνος (6) και παραπεσοντας, παλιν ανακαινιζειν εις μετανοιαν, ανασταυρουντας εαυτοις τον υιον του θεου και παραδειγματιζοντας (NA²⁷).

The following would be a literal translation: "For *it is* impossible *for* those who were once enlightened, and who tasted the heavenly gift and who became partakers of the Holy Spirit and who tasted the good word of God and powers of the coming age and who fell away, to restore again to repentance since *they are* crucifying of themselves the son of God and putting *him* to shame" (own translation).

Allen (2010) proposes that ἀδυνατον should function as predicate nominative and a finite verb εστιν is to be supplied making the main clause reads: “For it is impossible . . . to restore again to repentance.” Again, he suggests that the phrase παλιν ανακαινιζειν εις μετανοιαν serves as the subject infinitive of the sentence and thus reads: “For to restore again to repentance is impossible,” and places the substantival participles which are marked by the definite article accusative plural τους being the direct object of the subject infinitive (Allen, 2010, pp. 345-346). Agreeing with Allen on the function of ἀδυνατον and the infinitive phrase in the pericope, the passage would read as:

For to restore again to repentance those who were once enlightened, and who tasted the heavenly gift and who became partakers of the Holy Spirit and who tasted the good word of God and powers of the coming age and who fell away is impossible since *they are* crucifying of themselves the son of God and putting *him* to shame.

Interestingly, these formal translations (ESV, RSV, NRSV, NASB, ASV) agree to make ἀδυνατον as predicate nominative but deviate from putting παλιν ανακαινιζειν εις μετανοιαν as the subject instead of placing the infinitive phrase as part of the predicate. These translations supplied a subject and a finite verb “it is.”

Historical and Literary Contexts

The evident behavioral concern of the addressees in Heb 6:4-6 entails some knowledge of its historical background. This background information may shed light on the meaning of the passage in terms of the recipients’ identity and condition.

Recipient

The certainty of the identity of the original recipients of the Book of Hebrews is difficult to prove despite suggestions made by scholars (Carson & Moo, 2005, p. 608). Although the book is designated as Hebrews this title—ΠΡΟΣ ΕΒΡΑΙΟΥΣ (“to the Hebrews”)—was only appended probably by the last half of the second century. Its precise meaning is difficult to ascertain in modern scholarship (Bruce, 1990, pp. 3, 4). But a hint from the epistle denotes specific recipients. The book is written in polished *koine* Greek and despite various OT allusions none is clearly referenced from Hebrew and Aramaic (Carson & Moo, 2005, p. 608). Rather, the knowledge of the OT is by its Greek version (i.e., LXX) (Bruce, 1990, p. 9). Due to this observation, scholars conceive that the recipients were a group of Hellenistic Jewish Christians or Greek Christians knowing the OT and its sacrificial rituals (Bruce, 1990, p. 9; Guthrie, 1983, pp. 24-25, 31-38). These Christians might be meeting as a house church in the home of a believer “in or around Rome” (Lane, 2004, pp. 466, 468).

Internal evidence shows that the author of Hebrews has pastoral familiarity with the condition of his recipients (see Heb 2:2-4; 3:12, 13; 4:1, 11; 5:11-14; 6:9-11; 10:32-34; 12:4, 15; 13:7). According to Hebrews, the recipients were having a crisis of faith and being persecuted. They were publicly shamed due to their beliefs and their properties had been confiscated while others were imprisoned (10:33, 34). Remarkably, these believers were brought into the Christian faith by the witness of some who had personal contact with Jesus in which their preaching was accompanied by “signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit” (2:3,

4). These believers became their leaders, yet they had died and so the author of Hebrews is calling them to “remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith” (13:7). He admonishes them to “encourage one another day after day” (3:13).

Authorship

The earliest manuscript to assume Pauline authorship for Hebrews is the early third century *P⁴⁶* in which Hebrews is placed after Romans. This view reflects the position of the Eastern Church. Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-215) and Origen (185-253) argued for Pauline authorship despite some recognized difficulties evident in its more polished Greek as compared to Paul's epistles. On the other hand, the Western Church through the Muratorian Canon, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus of Rome rejected Pauline authorship. However, this view had changed through the influence of Jerome and Augustine when both considered Pauline authorship of Hebrews. But the question on Pauline authorship had resurfaced during the Reformation when Calvin and Luther suggested other persons beside Paul. Calvin proposed Clement of Rome or Luke while Luther suggested Apollos. Modern scholarship generally rejects Pauline authorship of Hebrews. Unfortunately, all other proposals for Hebrews authorship raise certain objections (Carson & Moo, 2005; Bruce, 1990; Guthrie, 1983). Until further evidence comes to light, the comment of Carson and Moo for Hebrews authorship is proved helpful. That the author which is known by its recipient is an educated person having thorough knowledge of the OT sacrificial system and the Septuagint (LXX) version of the Hebrew Bible (Carson & Moo, 2005, p. 604).

Genre

It is stated at the epilogue that the epistle is a “word of exhortation” (Heb 13:22). Guthrie suggests that if the nature of exhortation is similar with the one mentioned in Acts 13:15 then this epistle would be more of a homily. He says further that based on its structure it is a homily for a special occasion that is turned into an epistle form having added personal epilogue (Guthrie, 1983, p. 31). In the same manner, Lane writes that Hebrews is a “sermon in response to circumstances in the life of the audience” (p. 465).

Literary Context

A short analysis of the literary context of Heb 6:4-6, particularly its immediate context is necessary since the context is understood to be “the final arbiter for all decisions regarding the meaning of term or concept” (Osborne, 2006, pp. 39, 40). The immediate context of 6:4-6 which forms a single sentence begins from 5:11 to 6:12. The author's presentation of the high priesthood of the Son in the order of Melchizedek (4:14-5:10) is interrupted by his reflection on the condition of his hearers. The author of Hebrews reveals that there are lots of things to tell his audience, but he acknowledges the difficulty, particularly that the audience “have become dull of hearing” (5:11b). He expects them to be already διδασκαλοι (“teachers”). Instead, he finds them out in need of someone to teach them στοιχεια (“basic elements”) of God. Due to their spiritual condition, they are only able to partake liquid diet—γαλακτος—(“milk”), instead of στερεα τροφη (“solid food”). He then explains for whom the στερεα τροφη is. It is for the τελειοι (“perfect,” “mature”) who

trained their senses by themselves by means of εἶν (“practice”) to discern good and evil (vv. 12-14).

The author’s spiritual analysis of his audience is then followed by a conclusion marked by the inferential conjunction διὸ (“therefore” [6:1]), indicating it as the conclusion of the previous section. An inferential conjunction denotes “deduction, conclusion, or summary to the preceding discussion” (Wallace, 1996, p. 673). His desire to maturity—ἐπι την τελειότητα—is indicated by his use of hortatory subjunctive verb φερωμεθα and thus translates “let us be moved to maturity” (or perfection). This verb acts as the principal verb in 6:1-8, though an implied verb εστιν may be inserted in v. 4 (Winstead, 2011, p. 197).

The two Greek sentences that form the pericope (6:1-8) begin with the postpositive conjunction γαρ. There are varied views as to the function of γαρ in v. 4. This conjunction does not connect 6:4-6 to its immediate previous verse (v. 3) but to the whole previous section (6:1-3), particularly to the verb φερωμεθα, translated as hortatory subjunctive (ἐπι την τελειότητα φερωμεθα [“let us be brought on perfection”]) (see Attridge, 1989, p. 167). Oberholtzer identifies the conjunction γαρ to be causal (1988, pp. 320, 321), A causal conjunction “expresses the basis or ground of an action.” (Wallace, 1996, p. 674). But by looking at the subject being argued by the author of Hebrews, the conjunction γαρ is perhaps function as explanatory conjunction providing further statement on matters being discussed—faith immaturity and maturity (see 5:11-6:2).

The other conjunction γαρ in v. 7 connects this verse with the previous section—vv. 4-6. Lane regards this conjunction to be denoting also the “force of further explanation” (p. 143). In similar thought, Guthrie observes that vv. 7-8 serves as illustration of the point being previously argued using the realities of nature (p. 145). In here, a positive (v. 7) and negative (v. 8) agricultural imageries are employed. The land that receives rain and brings forth useful vegetation is blessed by God; whereas the land that yields worthless thorns and thistles is close to being accursed and ends into being burned. Two things should be noticed here. The land is close to but not yet being accursed. When it is burned, only the thorns and thistles are turned to ashes and that a burnt land becomes fertile. In any case, we should not overstate what is not explicitly stated.

Moreover, the pericope has a significant link with the section that follows (6:9-12). This section is commenced with the phrase πεπεισμεθα δε περι υμων αγαπητοι (“but we have been persuaded concerning you, beloved”). The postpositive conjunction δε should be understood as a “marker of contrast” (Danker, 2000). The first occurrence of this conjunction in 5:11-6:12 is in v. 8. Its usage in this verse is to contrast v. 8 with v. 7. Whereas the δε in v. 9 signifies a contrast with vv. 4-6 in which an optimism is here presented by the author to his audience which may have surprise them (Lane, 1991, p. 143; Ellingworth, 1993, p. 329).

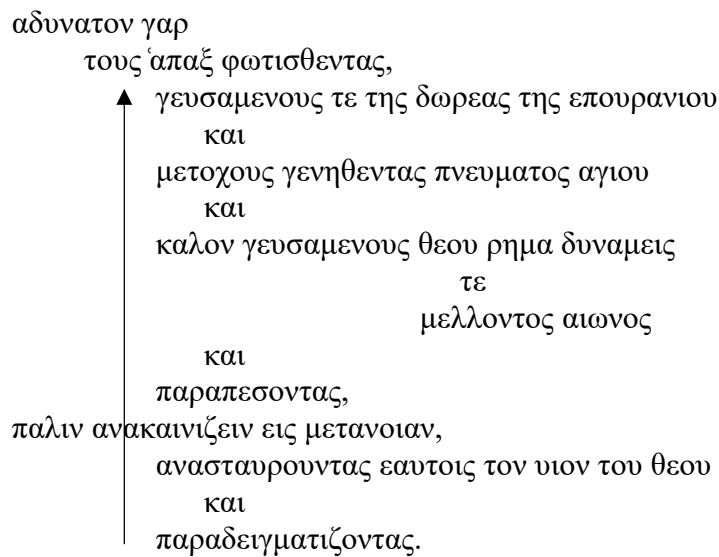
Another important element is the employment of first, second, and third persons. The verbs φερωμεθα (v. 1) and ποιησομεν (v. 3) are both in the first person plural except for επιτρεπη which is the verb of ὁ θεος (v. 3). In v. 9, the verb πεπεισμεθα is in the first person plural and the second person plural pronoun υμων (“you”). Whereas the participles in 6:4-6 are all in the third person plural. Participles as verbal adjectives function either as adjective or adverb. When used with articles and independent from any substantives in the passage the participles function as substantives (Wallace, 1996, p. 619). In the case of 6:4-6, the article τους serves as the article of the five participles and so are treated as substantives. The book of Hebrews is generally observed by scholars as carefully written by its author (Carson & Moo, 2005, p. 597). Thus, the person and number are not incidentals in the pericope. They are not simply a play of word usage, but the

author is, perhaps, making a contrast between the “we” (vv. 1-3) and “you” (v. 9) and “those” (vv. 4-6).

In the other four warning passages in Hebrews, the first and second persons (“we,” “us,” or “you”) are employed (see 2:3; 3:13; 10:26; 12:25b), except in 10:29 in which the substantive participle ο . . . καταπατησας infers a third person singular. By context, the referent of this participle is another person besides the person/s addressed. This shifting of first, second, and third persons are also recognized by Phillips and Winstead in which they state that the author of Hebrews is addressing not one same audience (Phillips, 2006, p. 187; Winstead, 2011, p. 196). Remarkably, he addresses αγαπητοι (“beloved” or “brothers”) the ones he calls υμων. Thus the shifting of first person (6:1-3) to third person in the warning passages (vv. 4-6) and back to first person and second person (vv. 9-12) denotes the author’s intention to contrast at least two groups in his mind: the brethren (vv. 1-3, 9-12) and the other group that had fallen away (vv. 4-6), although a possible hope cannot be dismissed with regards to their case (vv. 7-8) (Ellingworth, 1993, p. 318).

Literary Analysis of Hebrews 6:4-6

This section presents the literary analysis of the passage. It is followed by theological implications derived from the passage study. Hebrews 6:4-6 can be diagrammed as follows, pointing out their syntactical relations in which the main clause is αδυνατον γαρ . . . παλιν ανακαινιζειν εις μετανοιαν:



The construction of vv. 4-6a, being introduced by the definite article τους, having five participles (φωτισθεντας, γευσαμενους, γενηθεντας, γευσαμενους, and παραπεσοντας) of the same accusative case and separated by the conjunctions και and τε which are adjectival or substantival, serving as the direct objects of the infinitive ανακαινιζειν (v. 6) (Sproule, 1981, p. 328). Wallace states that this construction approximates a Granville Sharp’s rule plural construction; that is, all these five participles are referring to one single group. Nonetheless, Wallace is cautious in appropriating Granville Sharp construction to plural forms without qualification. Yet since the context of 6:4-6 is evidently pointing to one single identical group thus Wallace asserts that “the construction of

vv. 4-6 *approximates* a Granville Sharp plural construction" (p. 633). Furthermore, the last two participles in v. 6—*ανασταυρουντας* and *παραδειγματιζοντας*—should be accounted as causal participles (Oberholtzer, 1988, pp. 320-321).

The passage has an emphatic beginning—*αδυνατον γαρ τους απαξ φωτισθεντας*. The word *αδυνατον* means "powerless," "impotent," or "impossible" (BDAG, s.v. "*αδυνατον*"), expressing the incapability of something being done. It is paired with the first participial phrase *απαξ φωτισθεντας* ("once enlightened"). The word *απαξ* denotes a "single occurrence" or "decisively unique" (BDAG, "*απαξ*") thing implying the non-existence of any possibility of repetition or duplication. The first participle in the series of five is *τους φωτισθεντας* ("those who were enlightened"), from the verb *φωτιζω*. Bruce argues that since it is paired by *απαξ*, it refers not to a state but to something that is done once and for all (single event) and this experience may refer to baptism (pp. 145, 146; see also Ellingworth, 1993, p. 320; Ellingworth & Nida, 1983, p. 114). Ellingworth (1993) explains that the nonexistence of clear references to baptism in Hebrews may imply that this rite is not prominent in the context of the author (p. 320). But the same expression appears in 10:32—*φωτισθεντες* (only that it is in the nominative case). In this context, *φωτισθεντες* ("being enlightened") may refer to "receiving the knowledge of the truth" (v. 26) (Hughes, 1973, pp. 138, 139), implying conversion (Keener, 2014, p. 647; McKnight, 1992, pp. 45, 46). Conversion in the NT is manifested by baptism (see Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12, 36-38; 9:18; 16:15, 33; 19:5; 22:16; Rom 6:3, 4; Gal 3:27; Col 2:12). Thus "those who were once enlightened" in 6:4 were those who experienced conversion by the word of truth manifested through the act of baptism. Being in the passive voice means that the ones described by the participle are recipients (not doers) of the action. This idea is further reinforced by the next participle in the passage—*γευσσαμενους*.

The second description of those people in this warning passage is *γευσσαμενους τε της δωρεας της επουρανιου* ("and who tasted the heavenly gift"). The participle *γευσσαμενους* comes from the deponent verb *γευομαι* which occurs 3x in Hebrews. In literal sense, it means "to partake of something by mouth" (BDAG, *γευομαι*) (Matt 27:34; John 2:9; Acts 20:11) and metaphorically, it means "to experience something cognitively or emotionally" (BDAG, *γευομαι*). The three occurrences of this word in Hebrews (2:9; 6:4, 5) signify a metaphor meaning. Some contend, however, that the expression renders a "partial" as opposed to "full" experience (see Nicole, 1975, pp. 360, 361). But the context of its renderings in Hebrews (2:9; 6:4, 5) has no hint on matters of degree (McKnight, 1992, pp. 46, 47).

Moreover, some understood *δωρεα* ("gift") to be a referent to the Eucharist since it is something literally tasted (Bruce, 1990, p. 146). But this patristic understanding is somewhat foreign in the NT period. The ten occurrences of *δωρεα* in the NT denote two ideas without any hint to the rite of Lord's Supper (or Eucharist), namely gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; 10:45) and gift of salvation expressed in various ways (John 4:10; Acts 8:20; Rom 5:15, 17; 2 Cor 9:15; Eph 3:7; 4:7). Lane suggests that all these nuances are implied by the phrase *της δωρεας της επουρανιου* (1991, p. 141). That is, the gift which comes from heaven refers both to the salvation as gift of God and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the group referred to by the author of Hebrews as those "who tasted the heavenly gift" are the ones who have experienced the reality of their salvation by grace and all its benefits.

Although the reception of the Holy Spirit is already nuanced by the "heavenly gift," a further emphasis of this kind is found in the following phrase: *και μετοχους γενηθεντας πνευματος αγιου* ("and who became partakers of the Holy Spirit"). The adjective *μετοχος* (lexical form of *μετοχους*) means "partaking of" (Liddell, 1996), "one who shares with someone," "companion,"

or "partner" (Louw & Nida, 1989). It occurs 6x in the NT and 2x rendered as "partner" or "companion" (Luke 5:7; Heb 1:9) while the other four occurrences signify "partaking" (Heb 3:1; 3:14; 6:4; 12:8). The partaking of the Holy Spirit may refer to the reception of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Heb 2:4) as well as the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22, 23). Thus, this expression "became partakers of the Holy Spirit" denotes the ones referred to in this warning passage who have truly experienced the salvation of God as evidenced by their tasting the heavenly gift of salvation and partaking the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The fifth adjectival participial phrase to emphasize the salvific experience of this group is και καλον γευσαμενους θεου ρημα δυναμεις τε μελλοντος αιωνος ("and who tasted the good word of God and powers of the coming age") (6:5). Before going further, there is a need to clarify the functions of the two participles in this phrase separated by a conjunction: γευσαμενους . . . τε . . . μελλοντος. Having the same case, gender, and number (accusative, masculine, plural) γευσαμενους goes with the other participles in the construction, while μελλοντος has different gender and number (genitive and singular). The adjectival participle μελλοντος modifies the noun αιωνος for both have the same case, gender, and number. It may fall under Wallace's adjectival proper fourth attributive construction of participles (p. 618). The participle γευσαμενους has been treated previously and a repetition is not necessary. The phrase θεου ρημα ("word of God") is preceded by an adjective καλον ("good"). To make the adjective emphatic, the author places it in front of the participle γευσαμενους: καλον γευσαμενους θεου ρημα. Besides 6:5, the word ρημα occurs three other times in Hebrews and once it appears having the same construction in which the author of Hebrews employs the word ρημα with reference to creation: "the worlds were prepared by the word of God" (11:3). On the other hand, the author employs the word λογος 6x in Hebrews and once directly linked with God: ο λογος του θεου ("the word of God") (4:12). With these occurrences and usages, it would mean a synonymous use in Hebrews. By the way, the phrase θεου ρημα, though the word order is at times interchanged, appears 4x in the NT (Luke 3:2; John 3:34; 8:47; Eph 6:16).

The other phrase that is connected with the participle γευσαμενους is δυναμεις . . . μελλοντος αιωνος ("powers of the coming age"). Guthrie explains that the author might not be referring to a future event since he accounts the inauguration of the Messiah as the last days (1:2). The εσχατος τη ημερα and μελλοντος αιωνος are present realities in the time of the author although a future reference should not be negated (p. 143). Further, the tense of γευσαμενους is aorist, denoting a past time. One would not have tasted something that is still future. Thus, Ellingworth is correct that the "most direct reference" of καλον θεου ρημα is 2:1-4 which the "δυναμεις . . . μελλοντος αιωνος . . . accompanied and confirmed" it (p. 321). Put another word, the word of God, which is the foundational source of the knowledge for salvation, is accompanied by the powers of the coming age.

The last phrase in this series is και παραπεσοντας. The participle παραπεσοντας is derived from the verb παραπιπτω which is a word for sin in the Bible. Outside the Bible, this word simply means "to fall beside or aside" without further connotation (Michaelis, 1968, p. 17; Ellingworth, 1993, p. 322). In the Bible, it literary means to "fall beside," "go astray," "fall away," or "commit apostasy" due to one's failure "to follow through on a commitment" (BDAG, παραπιπτω). This verb is hapax legomenon in the NT, occurring only in 6:6, but its cognate noun παραπτωμα occurs 19x. The impact of this word could be intimated from its cognate noun usage and verbal used in the LXX. The word παραπιπτω has once appeared in the book of Esther. The king commands

Haman to honor Mordecai by the very words he has said, and the king reminds Haman not to fall short (*παραπιπτω*) from anything said (6:10). Further, the usage of *παραπιπτω* in the book of Ezekiel denotes grievous sins. It ignites the stretching of God's hand to destroy the people's source of food (14:13), the desolation of the land (15:8); the death for the person who does this sin in which all their righteousness avail nothing (18:24). Moreover, *παραπιπτω* is tantamount to blasphemy against God (20:27) and guilty of bloodshed, leading to a reproach and mockery to nations (22:4). Nonetheless, all the 19 occurrences of its cognate noun *παραπτωμα* in the NT are not terminal cases for always coupled with good news despite being considered grievous (see Matt 6:14; Rom 4:25; 5:15-18, 20; 11:11, 12; 2 Cor 5:19; Gal 6:1; Eph 1:7; 2:1, 5; Col 2:13).

All the previous four participles (*φωτισθεντας*, *γευσαμενους*, *γενηθεντας*, and *γευσαμενους*) portray the picture of conversion but this last participle (*παραπεσοντας*) in this series may undo all those experiences. That is, the once enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, became partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the good word of God accompanied by miracles and signs could come to nothing when one falls away (*παραπεσοντας*). But as stated earlier, the 19 usages of its cognate noun in the NT does not denote a terminal case despite being a grievous sin. Then why is it impossible again to renew to repentance (*αδυνατον . . . παλιν ανακαινιζειν εις μετανοιαν*) those who fall away (*παραπεσοντας*)? The answer to this question may come from the last two phrases in the pericope.

Some scholars argue that these participles (*ανασταυρουντας* and *παραδειγματιζοντας*) are temporal and thus translate: "while they are crucifying . . . and putting to shame." The problem with this translation, according to Ellingworth, is that the passage is not seemingly meant to call the apostate back to repentance but serves as warning to avoid at all cost. He argues to retain the traditional view that both participles should be considered as circumstantial "giving the reasons why apostates cannot be restored to repentance" (p. 324). Following the causal function of the last two participles in v. 6, the phrase *ανασταυρουντας εαυτοις τον υιον του θεου και παραδειγματιζοντας* could then be translated as "since *they are* crucifying of themselves the son of God and putting *him* to shame."

Crucifixion is a shameful and dreaded form of capital punishment. As observed by Hengel, the Roman world is entirely unanimous in their horror of crucifixion. Though crucifixion is used extensively in the early Roman Empire, the "cultured literary world wanted to have nothing to do with it, and as a rule kept quiet about it" (pp. 129, 130). It was then substituted by exile and confiscation of properties. Like the Romans, the Jews consider crucifixion with horror. It is a form of capital punishment for crimes of treason. For religious reasons, the Jews make no difference between hanging on a tree and crucifixion. They are both accursed as stated in Deut 21:23. It says that "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Hengel, 1981, pp. 114-128, 176-179).

Interestingly, there is a shift of participial tense in the passage. The last two phrases in v. 6 are two participles—*ανασταυρουντας* and *παραδειγματιζοντας*. While the last five participles are built from aorist stem, these last two participles are formed from present tense verb stem. Mounce explains that the significance of participles is their aspect in which a present participle denotes a continuous aspect (p. 241). As to their relationship with time, Wallace explains that the tenses of participles are like in the indicative but unlike in the indicative the controlling reference of participles is the main verb and not the speaker (p. 614). That is, present participles denote "action occurring at the same as the main verb" while aorist participles "generally indicates an action occurring *before* the time of the main verb" in the sentence (Mounce, 2003, p. 268). Since the main verb in the passage is in present tense, thus both participles denote continuous actions in the present

time of the author of Hebrews. In the same way, by noting the tenses of the participles, Hughes states that the aorist *παραπεσοντας* denotes a "decisive moment of commitment to apostasy," whereas "the present participles *ανασταυρουντας* and *παραδειγματιζοντας* indicate the continuing state of those who have once lapsed into apostasy: they keep on crucifying the Son of God and holding Him up to contempt" (p. 218). The continuing aspect of the present participles indicating continuous apostasy is affirmed by Attridge. He says, "the present participles describing the significance of apostasy are in the present tense. . . . This suggests that the action of apostasy involves a continuous and obdurate stance toward Christ" (p. 172).

These group of people referred to by the author of Hebrews had experienced genuine conversion and yet they fell away. The word *παραπεσοντας* ("fell away") does not denote a simple falling away but refers to serious sinning after conversion as denoted by the preceding participles. This conversion is founded from the good word of God and are accompanied by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, signs, and miracles and thus genuine. Despite the full-blown light of truth (rational and experiential) that has been received, it is falling away. This condition makes the sin committed deliberate. Yet its impossibility is not based on the sin itself for *παραπτωμα* (cognate of *παραπιπτω*) does not denote a hopeless case (being all coupled with good news of grace). What makes it impossible to renew into repentance is due to the continuous attitude or habit of deliberate contempt upon the Son of God that is ascribing the dread of crucifixion and its shame (*ανασταυρουντας εαυτοις τον υιον του θεου και παραδειγματιζοντας*).

What, then, is the connection of the Son of God (*τον υιον του θεου*)? The confession of the early Christian believers is upon Jesus Christ. The author of Hebrews says that the Son is the high priest who can sympathize with human weaknesses and whom to find mercy and grace (4:15, 16) and He is the source of eternal salvation (5:8, 9). In other words, Hebrews is saying that there is no salvation apart from Christ. Moreover, the Bible teaches that forgiveness is possible only because of Jesus Christ as advocate to the Father (1 John 2:1). The condition for forgiveness is confession of sin (1 John 1:9). But what would happen to those who have the continual habit of repudiating "the only basis upon which repentance can be extended" (Lane, 1991, p. 142) since *they are* crucifying of themselves the son of God and putting *him* to shame? It is impossible to renew them to repentance.

The two final verses of the pericope which is linked by the conjunction *γαρ* bring back to mind the true intention of the passage which has to do with maturity as points out by the verb *φερωμεθα* ("let us be moved to maturity" [6:1]). In addition, this illustrative agricultural imagery in vv. 7, 8 throws further light on v. 6. In these verses are four participles that denote the basis for blessing or curse. The aorist participle *πιουσα* shows the initial state to making the harvest possible—"For the land having drunk (*πιουσα*) the rain." The following three present participles (*ερχμενον*, *τικτουσα*, and *εκφερουσα*) denote progressive events which lead to the harvest. For Lane, "all interest is concentrated on the harvest, rather than on preliminary stages of growth. What is decisive is what is produced. The issue is usefulness or worthlessness" (p. 143).

Nonetheless, the passage paints the progressive actions built from the three present participles. The participle *ερχμενον* explains that the rain did not come once or twice but paired with the word *πολλακις* which translates as "coming often." The participle *τικτουσα* ("bearing forth") and its synonym *εκφερουσα* ("bringing forth") both refer to the progressive bearing in which the first is used for useful vegetation (*τικτουσα βοτανην ευθετον*), while the second is employed for yielding thorns and thistles (*εκφερουσα . . . ακανθας και τριβολους*). The land

that brings forth good plants receives a blessing from God but bringing forth thorns and thistles lead to its rejection which in the end is burned. What is burned in the end? The passage clarifies that it is the land, not the thorns and thistles, as denoted by the relative feminine singular pronoun *ης* which referent is the feminine noun *γη*. The main verb is the indicative present tense *μεταλαμβάνει*. Having the action of the three present participles contemporaneous with the verb, it denotes for a continuous progressive bearing of useful plant deserving blessing or thorns and thistles leading to its rejection, curse, and burning. Thus, in both instances (v. 6 and vv. 7-8) the present participles help clarify the magnanimity of the verdict.

There are conditions for the land (*γη*) to be able to bring forth useful crop in the passage. The land drunk the rain coming often to itself and being cultivated, and thus it brings forth useful crop which resulted to receiving blessing from God. But having produce thorns and thistles, it (land) is worthless and close of being accursed, whose end is burning. Put differently, the land that receives rain and being cultivated can either bring forth useful vegetation or worthless thorns and thistles. The former act results to blessing from God but the latter ends in rejection, curse, and burning. This points out twofold ideas in relation to 6:4-6. First, the group referred to in vv. 4-6 had experienced genuine conversion as metaphored by the rain and cultivation (v. 7). Yet the converted people can either grow into usefulness or fall into worthlessness.

But despite the warning, the author is quick to affirm hope to his audience whom he addressed as *αγαπητοι*. He says that their condition is better having hold the salvation. He reminds them that God is not unjust to forget their loving works of ministry to the brethren. But his desire is for their diligence (*σπουδη*) toward the full assurance of hope up to the end. They should not become lazy (*νωθρος*) but imitators (*μιμητης*) of those through faith and patience inherit the promises (vv. 9-12).

Theological Implications

This study has some theological implications. Firstly, it affirms the view that genuine believers may fall into sin. The idea that the passage is pointing to a group of phenomenologically false believers is not warranted. Unless the apostasy is a possible reality to the believers, there is no sense for the author of Hebrews to make a warning based on something impossible for the believers to become.

Secondly, greater knowledge of truth demands greater responsibility. In the case of the group referred to in 6:4-6, they have come to the point of knowing and experiencing the goodness of salvation, yet they have decided to fall back. In the Bible, salvation is defined as having a relationship with the source of salvation—Jesus Christ. That is, rejection of salvation is rejection of the person. This is not an act ushered by chance; rather, it is a willful decision. Thus, willful or deliberate sinning is so dangerous that once through it might not come out of it.

Thirdly, those who fail to mature die. It is a natural law that once a thing stops to grow starts to die. The author of Hebrews desires that the brethren will not continue with their immature elemental condition. He desires them to become mature in faith by not being lazy but diligent imitators of the faith and patience of those who came before them.

Finally, eternal security is continuity in Christ. The book of Hebrews nowhere teaches the idea of predestination or its modified form, once saved always saved. On the other hand, it teaches

perseverance to maturity by faith as the security in Christ. That is, once secured in Christ is always secured provided the believer remains and grows in Christ (cf. John 15).

CONCLUSIONS

The study draws the following conclusions. First, the recipients of the Book of Hebrews are Christian believers of whom the author has personal knowledge about their spiritual condition. They are led into the faith by the witness of people who had personal association with Jesus and had left them worthy examples of faith to emulate. Their conversion is by the good word of God being accompanied by signs and miracles. They can endure certain persecution. Yet the author desires for their maturity for they are still immature and unworthy of solid food.

Secondly, the referent group of Heb 6:4-6 were once genuine believers. Their genuine experience of conversion is specifically described by the adjectival participles in vv. 4-5. They had been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, became partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age. Nonetheless, they had fallen away from the faith.

Moreover, the main reason for the impossibility of renewing them again to repentance is due to their continual attitude of repudiating the cause of their salvation—Jesus Christ. By their deliberate sinning, according to the author of Hebrews, they are crucifying themselves and shaming the Son of God. They are not in no way different from the people who shouted “crucify him” at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus. This condition indicates their impossibility to repentance. Nonetheless, the passage is silent about the possibility of repentance when such a continual act ceases.

Lastly, this passage serves as a warning for those who decide not to hearken to the call of the author of Hebrews to maturity. It states that immaturity should not be a choice for believers. The danger is it may end up in rejection, having eschatological consequences.

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