

Another Possible View of Hebrews 6:1-6

Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, ² of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. ³ And this we will do if God permits. (By “this,” he is referring to going on to perfection if God permits.)

⁴ For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.

Note: The words in the parenthesis are mine. Once verse three is understood, it might be helpful to read the entire passage again without reading verse 3.

This passage is difficult so there are a variety of views that have been expressed. It seems to me that many commentators spend much time explaining what the author must have meant or could not have meant because on the surface, some phrases might conflict with the commentator’s theological stand. As a result, they spend time discussing whether a person can “lose his salvation.” Or, they spend time talking about “apostasy.” I am not convinced that the author intended this passage to provide a detailed treatise on these subjects. While he certainly intends to warn his readers about the dangers of falling away, he does not spell out all there is to know about many of the subjects that commentators seem to focus on in their commentaries on this passage.

I suggest that perhaps, much of what is being argued about was not even the point that the author was trying to make. I am positing a simpler view, one from the perspective of the teacher. Others seem fixated on trying to build theological arguments based upon some of the “difficult” things said by the author of Hebrews. I believe the author is using many of these “difficult” phrases to show that it is useless for a teacher to teach the gospel again to people that have “fallen away.”

When a gospel preacher encounters an unbeliever, his chief concern is to teach him the things that form the foundation for repentance and faith toward God. (The author alludes to this in the first two verses of this passage.) The gospel preacher knows that when unbelievers hear and understand this gospel, some will repent and have faith toward God. When such an unbeliever first hears and understands the gospel, it is glorious to him. With great joy, he believes it and begins to follow Jesus with a heart of thankfulness that Jesus died in order to save him. Peter uses the following phrase to describe the process. “Having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God” (I Peter 1:23). The preacher or teacher uses the God-given instrument (His Word) to bring about regeneration in the lives of the unbelievers he teaches.

But what should a teacher teach a person that “has fallen away?” What if a person has been enlightened to the gospel, become a partaker of the Holy Spirit, tasted of the good word of God and the powers of the age to come but has subsequently fallen away? What should a teacher teach that person?

Since that person has already heard, understood and experienced the glorious gospel, teaching him the gospel will not have the same result as it did the first time he heard and understood it. Therefore, the teacher should not expect the same result. It is impossible for the teacher to renew[1] such a person to repentance with the gospel. The gospel will not be glorious to him. How could it be? After all, he has already heard and understood it. Though it was at one time glorious to him, his current condition shows that he does not value it. He is content to bring shame to Jesus, the very one who died for him. He thus despises the death of Jesus on his behalf. It is impossible for a teacher to renew such a person to repentance with the gospel the same way as when the person first heard it. There is therefore no point in teaching him the very things he has already heard and understood beforehand.

Summary for the basis of my position:

I believe my position is justified on the basis of what the author says in the first two verses of this passage. He alerts the reader to his lesson plan. He comes right out and tells them that he does not plan to provide a foundation for repentance and faith as the letter progresses starting in chapter six. Then, immediately, he tells them why. He says that as a teacher, he knows that he cannot use such teaching to renew people to repentance after they have already responded to the gospel previously. Therefore, his lesson plan for the rest of the book does not include laying a foundation for repentance and faith toward God. It is that simple.

Other implications and related discussion about the passage:

What should be said about the concept of apostasy or the belief of some that it is possible for a person to “lose their salvation?” I believe that the Bible makes some clear statements about these subjects but I don’t believe this passage was meant by the author of Hebrews to explain all there is to know about them. It was not his purpose. To address these subjects, I prefer to use passages that I believe were meant to provide clear instruction about them.

Apostasy: The New Testament teaches in many places that anyone who turns away from the gospel and dies in that state will go to hell forever. Below is just one such passage:

“For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,²⁷ but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.²⁸ Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.²⁹ Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?³⁰ For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. And again, “The Lord will judge His people.”³¹ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:26-31).

From passages like this, some people insist that a person can “lose their salvation.” If I put myself in their “theological shoes,” I can certainly understand why they might come to such a conclusion. But I think it is safer, as much as it is possible, to set our theological positions aside whenever we attempt to understand any particular passage. If we simply take this passage at face value, we conclude that if we choose to push the gospel aside and go about living life as an unbeliever, there is simply no sacrifice for sins available to remedy our condition. There is only one result possible, eternal destruction. Thus, this passage not only provides clear instruction, it also provides a strong warning that God can use to create a sense of urgency within the believer.

When we read such passages (and there are several like it in the book of Hebrews), we eventually must ask why some people seem to turn away from the gospel and ultimately perish. Some will suggest that such people “lose their salvation” and they wrongly use Hebrews 6:1-6 to make their case. (I don’t think the author intended this passage to be the end all answer to this question.) There are other passages that seem to teach that people do not “lose their salvation.” For example, Jesus said, *“All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.³⁹ This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day.⁴⁰ And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:37-40).* It is clear from this passage that all the Father gives to Jesus will be raised on the last day. It seems that the real question is, “Who are the ones that the Father gives to Jesus?”

I believe Jesus brought both these subjects together in His teaching about the four soils.

“Therefore hear the parable of the sower: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside. ²⁰ But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. ²² Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful. ²³ But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty” (Matthew 13:18-23).

Those depicted as the 2nd and 3rd soil types seem to fit the description of those who “fall away” and perish. Those depicted as the 4th type of soil are the only ones who don’t perish. They bear fruit that lasts. If I compare them to the John 6 passage, I deduce that these are ones that the Father gives to Jesus. All the other soil types do not qualify as ones that the Father gives to Jesus. This paragraph is not intended to be a full dissertation on this subject. It is only provided to illustrate how I view it in a nutshell.

How does this relate to Hebrews 6:1-6? My point about the Hebrews 6 passage is to suggest that by itself, it was not intended to teach all we need to know about subjects such as apostasy or the notion that people can lose their salvation. I believe that there are other passages that were meant by the authors to provide teaching on those subjects.

Because of conclusions that some have made (wrongly in my opinion) about Hebrews 6:1-6, I suspect some bad advice has likely been given to Christians over the years. For example, some teach that there is a certain line a person can cross that makes them hopelessly damned and there is nothing they can do to change the outcome. They are doomed.

Should we try to help people who seem to have fallen away or just count them as doomed to eternal destruction? While it is true that all who die as apostates perish forever, we must not assume to know that this is the destiny of anyone who seems to be fallen away. David, a man after God’s own heart, committed adultery with Bathsheba and then had her husband Uriah killed to cover up his sin. Based upon a faulty view of Hebrews 6:1-6, many would simply assume that David had fallen away and was hopelessly doomed to eternal destruction. The prophet Nathan did not assume that David was apostate and doomed to eternal destruction. He went to him and rebuked him for his sin. David repented and was restored to a vibrant faith. Evidently, he was one who is depicted by the 4th soil type, the good ground.

Truly, if a person dies in a “fallen away” condition, he will suffer eternal destruction. But since we cannot know if that is a person’s destiny, we must not presume it. Instead, as much as they will receive it, we must try to help people who seem to be fallen away. We can pray for them and we can warn them with the same warnings we find in the book of Hebrews. The writer of Hebrews strongly warns but he never tells people that they might as well give up because their fate is sealed.

“But, beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany salvation, though we speak in this manner” (Hebrews 6:9).

[1] There is no reason to say from this particular passage that God cannot or will not bring about repentance in that person if He so chooses. The author of Hebrews seems to be saying that it is impossible for a teacher to renew the “fallen away” person using the same gospel. It is impossible for a teacher to bring it about by teaching the person the gospel all over again. (Actually, only God can renew a person to repentance and faith even the first time a person hears and understands the gospel. The teacher himself cannot do this. But cooperating with God, he proclaims the gospel to unbelievers and some are renewed to repentance in this process. So, even though the teacher himself cannot bring it about, his preaching is used by God to do it. Similarly, Jesus commanded us to go and **make disciples**. We do not have the power to make disciples but He commanded us to make them. So, we

proclaim the gospel and disciples are made. We proclaim the gospel and some are renewed to repentance. The gospel is the instrument and the preacher is merely the one employing the instrument.)