

In June of this year, a guy called Dermot bought a plane ticket to Glasgow and arrived at Dublin airport. But once he got through security, he didn't go towards the gate to board the plane so he could visit that wonderful city! Instead he walked straight from the departure area into arrivals, went through passport control and arrived at the baggage reclaim hall.

Why? Well because a few days earlier he'd arrived in Dublin airport on a flight from Australia. But unfortunately, his luggage didn't. As happened to so many people this summer, his luggage was got lost.

And the next day, when he contacted the airport to ask about his luggage, he couldn't get through. And even when he went back to the airport, the staff there were so overwhelmed by the amount of lost luggage that they couldn't help him.

And obviously, he couldn't just walk directly into the baggage reclaim area to look for it. That's because as you might have seen, there is a no re-entry system in the airport. Once you've gone through those arrivals doors, you can't get back into the airport.

So that's when Dermot decided to buy a ticket for a cheap flight, and use that ticket not to travel, but instead to get to the baggage hall where he could search for and ultimately find his lost case!

But what's this got to do with us, this Sunday morning? Well, we are getting back to the letter of Hebrews, which we were studying before our What's the Story series. And we're going to read a passage that many people find really disturbing.

That's because on first reading it seems to say that it is possible for believers in Jesus to fall away from their relationship with God and be lost. And that if that happens, then there is a no re-entry system in place. That, like with those gates at Dublin airport, there is no way back into God's kingdom.

And so some people have read this passage and been terrified that they've fallen so far from Christ that they have become lost and can never get back.

But I hope that as we go through this passage, we'll see that although the warning here is serious, it does not remove the assurance of our salvation. Instead, like the author of Hebrews, we can be confident of better things in our lives!

Hebrews 6:4-12: "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, ⁶ 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.

⁷ Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. ⁸ But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.

⁹ Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation. ¹⁰ God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. ¹¹ We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. ¹² We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised."

1. A Challenging Passage

As we've seen, the writer of this letter believed that Jesus is better.

- He is better than the angels, than Moses, than Joshua and the Jewish High Priests. "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being." Hebrews 1:3
- And because of this, what he can do in our lives is better. He is the destroyer of the devil, the conqueror of death, the one who can free us from fear and death, and bring us into ultimate rest.

And so the challenge that he brought was to "Fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess." Hebrews 3:1; to be committed to Jesus and depend on him for everything that we need.

But some of the original readers of this letter were struggling to do that. Some of them were even tempted to give up completely and go back to the Judaism they'd come from.

And so this section was written to help them to understand exactly what was at stake. To see the seriousness of falling away and instead commit their lives to Christ.

But there is a real challenge with this passage because it is one of the most controversial passages in the whole New Testament. In part that's because some of the language the writer used here is ambiguous. And this opens it up to numerous interpretations.

And so what we need to do is interpret the obscure by the obvious. If we believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, then we know that one part will not contradict another.

And so we need to understand this passage in a way that is consistent with the rest of the Bible. We need to let Scripture help us to interpret Scripture.

2. An Inconsistent Interpretation

That's important here because as I said earlier, some think this passage teaches that believers in Jesus can be irretrievably lost! They read, *"It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, ⁶ if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance."* Hebrews 6:4-6

According to this view, these verses describe someone who has been saved, but now have rejected Jesus. And so they are lost. They are again enemies of God, outside of his kingdom. And not only that, they can never be saved again. They have crossed that point of no return.

And if all that we had of the Bible were these verses, we might think they are right. But the problem is, that this view is inconsistent with many plain and obvious Bible verses that teach the security of those who trust in Jesus.

a) Our Eternal Security

Jesus promised that *"Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."* John 5:24

Or, *"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand."* John 10:27-28

And this is also what Hebrews teaches elsewhere in the letter.

- Because Jesus is alive: *"He is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them."* Hebrews 7:25
- The promise of the new covenant we have in Christ is that *"I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."* Hebrews 8:12
- And because of the finished work of Jesus on the cross, *"By one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy."* Hebrews 10:14
- And so God's wonderful promise is that: *"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."* Hebrews 13:5

So Hebrews 6 isn't teaching that Christians can fall away and be lost forever, as that would be inconsistent with the rest of the Bible's teaching on the eternal security of all who trust in Jesus.

Today we can be sure that if we have faith in Jesus, then we are safe in his hands and that nothing and no-one can separate us from his love.

3. A Lack of Faith

So what then is this passage warning us against? Well, there are a number of views.

- Some believe that this is a hypothetical situation that cannot actually happen – "If a Christian fell away, even though they can't, then it would be impossible to bring them back to repentance."
- Others think that the judgement here is that of believers losing their reward but not their salvation!

But the view that I believe best fits is that the people the author is talking about here are those who seem to be genuine Christians as they've participated in the church community, but, through falling away, they show that they've never had genuine faith in him!

- So they've *"been enlightened."* Hebrews 6:4, in the sense that they learned about the gospel.
- They've *"tasted the heavenly gift."* Hebrews 6:4, and experienced some of the joy, peace and love that God gives to his people through Christ.
- They've *"shared in the Holy Spirit."* Hebrews 6:4, maybe being impacted by his presence, feeling his convicting influence.

- They've "tasted the goodness of the word of God." Hebrews 6:5, reading the Bible, enjoying the promises and comfort.
- And they've experienced the "powers of the coming age." Hebrews 6:5, seeing God at work in people's lives and difficult situations.
- They might even have repented publicly – making a profession of faith.

To those around them, they look the part. They talk the talk. But although they might fool others or even themselves, God knows where they stand. He knows that although they've experienced all of this, they've never put their trust in Jesus and accepted him as Saviour and Lord.

a) Outside of God's Kingdom

They are like those that Jesus spoke about when he said "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" Matthew 7:22–23

These people participated in the community of faith. They were involved alongside believers in evangelism, deliverance and miracles. And yet they never came into a real relationship with Jesus. They were never saved.

And so when they fall away, when they reject Jesus, they do not lose their salvation. Instead they show that they never were saved in the first place.

That was like Judas. He looked like one of the disciples. He listened to Jesus' teaching, saw Jesus' miracles, even shared in Jesus' mission. And yet, when the time came, he betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver and so showed that he was always "the one doomed to destruction." John 17:12

b) Heading to Destruction

The author illustrated this from the world of farming. "Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God." Hebrews 6:7

Like the good soil in Jesus' Parable of the Sower, those who respond to the Word of God with faith, will produce a good crop for the Lord of the harvest. They will receive the blessing of God, the gift of eternal life in God's presence forever!

"But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned." Hebrews 6:8

Like the other soils in Jesus' parable, these people have the same privilege of hearing the gospel. But they don't respond with genuine faith. They resist the truth, or don't let it penetrate into their hearts, or choose instead the pleasures of this world and the deceitfulness of wealth.

And so they produce nothing of value for God because they are still under the curse of their sin and will face the wrath of God!

4. A Serious Warning

But if that is what this passage is about, how can we understand the warning that, "It is impossible... if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance." Hebrews 6:4,6? If these people appear like believers, but ultimately walk away from Jesus having never put their faith in him, can they really never be saved?

a) A Hardened Heart

Well, that is one possibility. They have tasted all that Jesus died to give them, but they have thrown it all back in his face, and so "to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace." Hebrews 6:6.

It is as if they have chosen to stand in solidarity with those evil men who conspired to crucify Jesus. They have finally and decisively rejected Christ, hardening their hearts against all of God's grace and love!

It is a frightening possibility, that people could resist the work of God's Spirit so decisively, that they will never be saved!

b) A Temporary Situation

But some understand this warning differently. The tense of v6 allows it to be translated, that it is impossible for them to be brought to repentance, not "because... they are crucifying the Son of God all over again." Hebrews 6:6, but "while they are crucifying him!"

It is possible that the writer was not saying that they could never repent. But that they could never repent, while they were

still rejecting Jesus. It holds out the hope that once they stop disgracing Christ, they could be brought to repentance and faith in him!

But whatever understanding is right, it shows the seriousness of rejecting Jesus. If we do not accept him as Lord, we are as it were, nailing him to the cross! We are rejecting him as a failure and a fraud. And that puts us in grave danger of being lost forever!

5. An Encouraging Declaration

So the author of Hebrews understood what was at stake. He knew that some people might seem like followers of Jesus, but later on show that they'd never trusted in him. And he knew how serious the consequences of that would be.

But he concluded this section with an encouraging declaration about his confidence that his readers were not like that. **"Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation."** Hebrews 6:9

This was his conviction. Yes some people might fall away and show that they'd never been saved. But not his readers. He was confident of better things from them.

He was sure that they would not turn away from Christ! Not because this would save them, but that this would be the evidence that they had been saved, that they had trusted in Jesus, that they were genuine believers.

a) Evidence of Faith

Why was that? Well, of course, in a sense, he could not be certain. Only God sees into someone's heart. Only God knows how someone stands before him.

But he was confident that they were true believers because he could see their genuine loving service to God's family. **"God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them."** Hebrews 6:10

This love for other Christians was the evidence that they were in relationship with God. That the same as what John wrote about in his letter. **"We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers."** 1 John 3:14 God is love, so love is the fruit that grows when we are in relationship with him!

And if we have put our faith in Jesus, then there should increasingly be evidence in our life that we are in relationship with God. Of course, none of us will ever be perfect. We will always fall short of the glory of Christ. But if our faith is genuine, then we will see God's grace at work in us, changing us and empowering and equipping us to serve him!

And that evidence can deepen our assurance that we truly do belong to Jesus. Not because we are what we should be, but because we are not what we used to be!

b) Exhortation to Persevere

So he was confident about the genuineness of his readers' faith. But this was not cause for complacency. Instead this was an encouragement for them to keep on going in their walk with Christ.

"We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. ¹² We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised." Hebrews 6:11-12 He desperately wanted them to persevere in their faith to show that they were truly children of God!

Conclusion

And we need to do the same. This passage is a serious warning! We mustn't miss this.

- It is possible for us to be involved in a church, to experience some of what it means to be a Christian and yet not have genuine faith in Christ! If we walk away, then we're disgracing Christ and putting ourselves in real danger! We might not get back!
- So this morning, we need examine our hearts and lives and make sure that we have put our faith in Jesus and make sure that our lives show evidence of things that accompany salvation.
- And then we can press on in our faith – trusting in his finished work on the cross, rejoicing in his eternal salvation, confident of better things because we are safe and secure in his hands and so one day we will inherit all that he has promised us by his amazing grace.