

WHAT DOES HEBREWS 6:4-6 TEACH ABOUT
SECURITY OF SALVATION?

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to answer the question; what does Hebrews 6:4-6 teach regarding security of salvation? There are three main views; one, that a Christian can lose their salvation, two that a Christian never *truly* believed to begin with, and three that the Christian can fall into a perpetual¹ state of apostasy yet still remain eternally secure.

Hebrews 6:4-6 says:

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 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.

Hebrews 6 is no doubt a difficult passage and when read in isolation it almost seems to indicate that if a believer falls away from Christ i.e. fall away from the truth, they can either lose their salvation or they never had it to begin with.

With all difficult passages one of the first principles in Biblical Interpretation is to use the simple passages to interpret the difficult ones. While student of scripture may not initially know what it is saying, they can determine what it is *not* saying as the Bible does not contradict itself. In order to help understand what this passage is saying, I will begin with a brief background on salvation and the difference between assurance and eternal security. This will be followed by an analysis of Hebrews 6:4-6 that will show various viewpoints, be followed by my analysis, and conclude with how it applies to us today.

Salvation, Assurance, and Eternal Security

Before beginning an analysis of the text, it is important to define terms. Assurance is the believers understanding of his or her Eternal Security in Christ. Security simply means that a

¹ Note I didn't say permanent.

person is held tight, protected, or free from danger. In the context of Christ, eternal security means that Christ is the guarantor of eternal life and He will never take it away. A simple way of stating eternal security is the old adage ‘once saved always saved.’ Consequently, Eternal Security found in Christ cannot be influenced by outside forces and is independent of even the believers own behavior; good or bad. If this was not the case, assurance of salvation would be impossible and his or her security would depend on the individual or others.

Eternal life is the second word that should be defined biblically. Scripture is clear that it is a gift (Eph. 2:8-9, Rom 6:23, Rom. 1:16, John 6:47, John 1:12, Titus 3:5). How this is viewed will ultimately determine how Hebrews 6 is interpreted. Since eternal life is ‘eternal,’ once given it will last forever and therefore cannot be returned. Christ himself said in John 10:28 “And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.” Notice it says ‘neither shall anyone,’ this means no one and that includes oneself. If a person says that they can give the gift back then they’re saying that they can get out of the grasp of God’s hand. Paul, in Romans 8, also supports this idea when he notes that “Nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.” The term nothing, by definition, includes ourselves.

Therefore eternal security can only be conditioned upon the power and promises of God, not of the believer. Dr. Anderson agrees stating “In the final analysis, the eternal security of the believer rests on the power of God to preserve the saints, not on the power of the saints to persevere.”² If salvation didn’t rest solely on Christ it would beg the question; “by whose commitment are we saved?” If our salvation, and consequently our eternal security, was dependent on any measure of works on our part, assurance would be impossible. Yet 1 John 5:11-13 makes it clear that we can know that we have eternal life.

² Anderson, 189.

And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.

Hebrews 6:4-6 – Common Interpretations

As stated earlier most commentators have primarily³ taken Hebrews 6:4-6 in one of two ways; either to assert that a person can lose their salvation or that a person never had it to begin with. Most five point Calvinists fall into the latter category and John Piper is no exception when he teaches that “This passage says that there is a spiritual condition that makes repentance and salvation impossible. ... this text is a warning to us not to assume that we are secure when our lives have some religious experiences but *no growing fruit* [a.k.a. works]. And the reason for showing us this serious situation is so that we will flee from it, and *move to solid ground*⁴ [solid ground being works a.k.a. ‘growing fruit’] and lasting joy”⁵ [emphasis mine]. If Piper is correct, works are required to prove that we’re saved by Christ. Based on the understanding of the simple passages above it’s clear that the security of the believer rests in the power and promises of God and *not* on an individual’s works or “growing fruit.”⁶

John MacArthur holds a similar view in dealing with “pretenders” of the faith but concludes that the writer of Hebrews is directing his warnings to unbelievers who hear the Gospel and reject it. These ‘non-believers’ apparently “fall away” from Christ by denying Him. He states there are “No terms familiar to salvation are there because these people aren't saved.

³ There are some expositors such as Kent who hold the view that falling away is purely hypothetical. Yet he does say that if it did occur that individual would end up in hell. (Homer A. Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), 115;)

⁴ Piper routinely uses nebulous language such as this, but to claim that our works are somehow ‘solid ground’ as opposed to the power and promises of God is farcical.

⁵ Piper, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/when-is-saving-repentance-impossible>

⁶ Note that assurance is the Achilles heel of the reformed position. Scripture along with sound logic and reason dictates that assurance is impossible if it has any basis in a person’s works. I have to give RC Sproul credit for being consistent in his presuppositions and concluding that he too can’t ultimately know that he is saved. Enter web address here.

They had all of this sort of salvation. No mention of believing, no mention of receiving the truth”⁷ This begs the question of how one can fall away from something they were never a part of. MacArthur continues his interpretation and applies it as a dire warning to those who reject Christ: “This is the verdict of any person who rejects the full revelation of Christ. If you would dare to do this, you will *never* be saved.”⁸ [emphasis mine] Forget for a moment the fact that his double predestination bias comes into view; the immediate problem with this interpretation is the fact that he is forced to neglect the context and redefine the terms “enlightened,” “tasted”, and “partakers” in verse 5.

However, if a believer assumes that based on Hebrews 6 they could lose salvation or that they never had it to begin with, where is the assurance of salvation that John and Paul speak of so clearly? Who’s to say that in the future a believer would not deny Christ? Logically they cannot know and they can only *hope* this is the case. In fact, R.C. Sproul openly concludes this point.⁹ Sproul’s conclusion to the question of assurance is long, but provides valuable insights into what happens when a person views passages such as Hebrews 6 in the way described above:

There are people in this world who are not saved, but who are convinced that they are. The presence of such people causes genuine Christians to doubt their salvation. After all, we wonder, suppose I am in that category? Suppose I am mistaken about my salvation and am really going to hell? How can I know that I am a real Christian?

A while back I had one of those moments of acute self-awareness that we have from time to time, and suddenly the question hit me: "R.C., what if you are not one of the redeemed? What if your destiny is not heaven after all, but hell?" Let me tell you that I was flooded in my body with a chill that went from my head to the bottom of my spine. I was terrified.

I tried to grab hold of myself. I thought, "Well, it's a good sign that I'm worried about this. Only true Christians really care about salvation." But then I began

⁷ MacArthur, *A Warning to Pretenders*, Sermon on Hebrews 5:11-6:8 August 20, 2000. Grace to You Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Most who hold this view fall into two categories: they either illogically hold to assurance while at the same time undermine it; or they are sound logically and conclude, as Sproul does, that assurance is ultimately impossible. I respect Sproul for openly admitting and following his theology to its logical conclusion as most laymen and theologians do not.

to take stock of my life, and I looked at my performance. My sins came pouring into my mind, and the more I looked at myself, the worse I felt. I thought, "Maybe it's really true. Maybe I'm not saved after all."

I went to my room and began to read the Bible. On my knees I said, "Well, here I am. I can't point to my obedience. There's nothing I can offer. I can only rely on Your atonement for my sins. I can only throw myself on Your mercy." Even then I knew that some people only flee to the Cross to escape hell, not out of a real turning to God. I could not be sure about my own heart and motivation. Then I remembered John 6:68. Jesus had been giving out hard teaching, and many of His former followers had left Him. When He asked Peter if he was also going to leave, Peter said, "Where else can I go? Only You have the words of eternal life." In other words, Peter was also uncomfortable, but he realized that being uncomfortable with Jesus was better than any other option!¹⁰

Sproul's conclusion is that assurance is impossible; and in fact that's okay, it's better to be with Jesus in doubt. This is like saying that it's better to be in a marriage not knowing whether or not your wife or husband is about to divorce you the next day.¹¹ How can you build a marriage this way without trust and assurance that this is not a possibility? The same holds true with Christ, how can we truly grow as disciples if we always fear permanent 'divorce' from God? Sproul's conclusions also fly in the face of John and Paul's assertions regarding our security in Christ.

The question remains, according to Hebrews 6, can a believer "fall away from the truth"? Can a person who one day believes in Christ as savior then a day or month or years later, say they don't believe anymore? Can they fall away from the truth? The answer is yes; it happens to people all the time. Christians get hung up in the wrong crowd and don't guard themselves and succumb to the sinful nature. But can they lose salvation? When they trust Christ are they saved and are they saved forever? If our security rests in the hands of Christ and God, then the answer is a resounding yes; they are forever saved.

¹⁰ R. C. Sproul *TableTalk* (Nov 6, 1989): p. 20.

¹¹ It would be better to not be married than to have to deal with that because at least a person knows where they stand.

Hebrews 4:4-6 – What it really teaches

The real crux of explaining Hebrews 6 not only lies in the context but the target audience. Are these believers or unbelievers? Dr. Storms recognizes the importance of the issue stating: “Are these born-again Christian men and women? If so, the doctrine of eternal security is shattered.”¹² Dr. Storms believes the audience in view is unbelievers, but what does the context clearly indicate?

Believers or Unbelievers?

Hebrews was written by an unknown author¹³ and was directed towards a group of unknown Jewish believers. Dr. Constable notes that

“The writer said that he and those to whom he wrote had come to faith in Jesus Christ through the preaching of others who had heard Jesus (2:3-4). Apparently those preachers had since died (13:7). The original readers had been Christians for an extended period of time (5:12). So probably the earliest possible date of composition was about A.D. 60.¹⁴

The author also refers to his target audience as brothers, a term used exclusively in scripture for those who are saved...

3:1 – therefore holy brethren
 3:12 – take here brethren
 6:9 – beloved
 10:19 – therefore brethren
 13:22 – I urge you brethren

In addition verse 5:12 states “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.” Why would the writer tell unbelievers that they should be teachers

¹² Dr. Sam Storms, *The Possibility of Apostasy*, <http://www.samstorms.com/all-articles/post/hebrews-6:4-6-and-the-possibility-of-apostasy>, last accessed July 2013.

¹³ Most likely not Paul, as Paul didn't receive the message of Christ second-hand. (Heb. 2:3)

¹⁴ Dr. Constable, notes on Hebrews, 2.

by now? The writer would only make this statement if they were already believers. Thus, it is clear that believers are in view, specifically immature ones in need of the milk of the word.

Looking at the pericope in view, verses 6:1-9, verse 1 begins saying “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...” Note the writer says “let *us* go on to perfection,” he is including himself in the goal. Are we to believe that the writer of Hebrews is not a believer?

Verse 2-3 “...of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits.” In verse 2-3 the “of” could be translated as “regarding”, “now regarding baptism, hands etc.” he’s telling them that he wants to move them along in the discipleship process, but he can’t do that yet because they don’t have the basics down yet. It is clear the writer did not have unbelievers in view when he desired to teach them the meat of the Word.

Verses 4-5 are critical, “For it is impossible for those who were once **enlightened**, and have **tasted** the heavenly gift, and have **become partakers** of the Holy Spirit, and have **tasted** the good word of God and the powers of the age to come,” The participles, φωτισθέντας (literally to make known), γευσσάμενους (tasted), μετόχους γεννηθέτας (become sharers), are all being used to not only describe who these people are, but what these people have experienced in the past as a single event (aorist tense). It could be translated as “it is impossible for the ones once having been enlightened, for the ones once having tasted of the heavenly gift, and for the ones once having become sharers of the Holy Spirit and having tasted of God...”

It’s interesting to note the Greek word μετόχους is used only five other times in the New Testament. Luke 5:7, Heb. 1:9, 3:1, 3:14, and 12:8. Hebrews 3:1 is of particular interest

because it is used in the same way “Therefore, holy brethren, partakers (or sharers) of the heavenly calling.” There’s no escaping that “holy brethren” a.k.a. believers are in view. Heb. 3:14 “For we have become partakers (sharers) of Christ...”, and Heb. 12:8 “...for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers (sharers)..” The author is making the point that because you are sons; expect to be sharers in “chastening.” One should observe that in all these instances, the context of who the partakers are is made clear and is unquestioned. Why is it questioned in Hebrews 6:5?

In verse 5 if the descriptions; being a partakers, tasters, and enlightened, are not clear enough, the pericope starting from verse 1 to verse 9 makes it clear. As stated earlier the writer includes himself in Verse 1 because he uses a first person plural verb ποιήσωμεν (let us do). These are also the same ones who were to move on from the basics and be taught about baptism and laying of hands. The writer wishes to do this as well! In verses 1-9, there is no contextual or syntactical reason why the writer would shift from first person plural in verse 1-3 to describe believers, to describing second person plural *unbelievers* in verse 5 then shift back to calling them beloved in verse 9. What’s clear is that *those* who have fallen away are believers who have gone astray. When a person uses these participles to indicate the attributes of *unbelievers*, it really brings into question whether or not a person is allowing their theology to drive their exegesis rather than let exegesis drive their theology. A natural reading of this passage in context makes it clear the readers are believers. Dr. Bing concludes likewise stating

The evidence is overwhelming, both in the general nature of the epistle and in the warnings themselves, that the author is addressing Christians. The fact that he so often and so clearly reminds them of their salvation experience is a crucial basis for his appeals to go on to maturity. Based on these clear affirmations in the text, attempts to explain away the obvious seems theologically driven. They are not in need of salvation, but faithful endurance.¹⁵

¹⁵ Dr. Bing <http://www.gracelife.org/resources/articles.asp?id=21>, Dr. Bing lists 12 detailed reasons why believers are in view.

The Purpose is Key

Recall that this book was written in the 60AD time frame. It was a time of great derision for Christians by the Romans, particularly for Messianic Christians as they came not only under duress from the Romans, but from unbelieving Jews. Because of persecution, many Messianic Jews decided that it would be better to simply go back to the law and tradition and avoid the onslaught of persecution. Dr. Constable notes “He urged the original readers to persevere in their faith rather than turning from Christianity and returning to Judaism. A note of urgency and pastoral concern permeates the whole letter.”¹⁶ The point of the book of Hebrews is to show that Jesus Christ is superior to all things that Jews held dear. Constable summarizes it succinctly; “We will only realize our full eternal reward as believers if we appreciate the greatness of Jesus Christ and continue to trust God rather than turning away from Him in this life.”¹⁷

These readers were Jewish people who placed their faith in Christ. Some lost homes, property etc. Persecution came more and more and as it came some of them went back to the Law and Judaism. They even began sacrificing again, as if Christ’s sacrifice wasn’t enough! Chapter two has clear indicators that falling away after believing is a real possibility. The writer is encouraging them to remain in the faith. “Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away.” – Heb. 2:1. He continues and encourages them to be like Christ who fulfilled His work and was faithful to God. “Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus, who was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was faithful in all His house.” –

¹⁶ Dr. Constable, 4.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Heb. 3:1-2. From there he gives a warning as to why believers should not stray and why they should work together; “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end,...” – Heb. 3:12-14. What can clearly be seen then is that there are believers who have given up on Christ and gone back to the Law, and believers who have remained faithful; this as opposed to a comparison between believers and non-believers.

In Chapters 1 through 3 the writer is saying that Jesus is better than the law, better than Moses, better than the high priest, better than Melchizedek etc. In the last part of chapter 5 and beginning of 6 he warns them because of what they have been doing. They’ve been placing Judaism above Christ. So in verse 6 when he says “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.” In other words every time they make a sacrifice they’re crucifying Christ again and saying that Christ’s sacrifice was not enough.

But he’s warning the Hebrews if they continue in sin, expect God’s judgment and expect loss of rewards (vv 7-8) and that those things that will be burned up. But in verse 6 many theologians conclude that the phrase “when you fall away it’s impossible to come to repentance” means “when you fall away you lose salvation and can’t come back.” Before describing the meaning here it will be helpful to define what it means to fall away and what does it mean to renew them again to repentance.

Falling away does not mean they fall away to hell. The author is describing falling away from the truths of God’s word which is exactly what the author was warning them not to

do. Remember these Jewish believers had walked away and were going back to the law system because they didn't want to be in persecution anymore. They were taking the easy way out. They were denying the truths of God's word. They were saying this is too tough I want to conform to the world.

So the problem for them is that it is impossible to get those who have 'fallen away' to have a change of mind (a.k.a. repentance) as long as they crucify the son of God. Another way of saying it is...It is impossible for them to have a change of mind as long as they continue to practice the sacrificial system under the law and deny God's word! Still another... 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.

Repentance does not mean to turn from sin. It is the Greek word metanoia which means 'change of mind'. These Jews will remain out of fellowship with God unless they change their mind about what they are doing. As long as they are working for salvation, by practicing the law, they will never have a change of mind and understand that the law doesn't save. The general principal is that works never save, and unless they change their mind about that it will be impossible for them to understand that Christ is the best, that Christ is better than anything, that He is better than the law, He is better than the sacrifices.

Conclusion and Application

In conclusion, what does this passage mean for us and what does it teach about eternal security? Regarding the latter, it means that this passage doesn't invalidate that truth 'once saved always saved.' Our understanding of how one is eternally saved should be based on simple passages like John 3:16 and an understanding of God's power and character. Regarding the former, because of our understanding of our security in Christ we can be assured we will

always be eternally safe. However, if a believer turns away from God and goes his/her own way, they will experience the judgment of God, they will experience the death rendering effects of sin, and they will lose rewards in heaven. It does not mean they will lose salvation, and it certainly doesn't mean that they were never "true" Christians as many assert. Dr. Bing summarizes it well "believers don't need to fear burning in hell, but they should fear an experience of God's burning anger if they willfully turn away from the benefits of the eternal salvation which Jesus Christ provided through His death and resurrection."¹⁸

¹⁸ Bing.

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