

## Hebrews 6:1-12

### The Danger of Falling Away

*For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame (vv. 4-6).*

When the Lord Jesus Christ partook of His final Passover with His disciples, the Passover in which He instituted the Lord's supper, He predicted His own betrayal by one of His followers. So we read in Mt 26:21 *And as they did eat, he said, Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me.* This saying cut to the heart of His disciples. After all they had been with Christ for some 3 years. They had witnessed His miracles. They had heard His teaching. They had been sent forth by Him and had been enabled to perform miracles in His name. It's no wonder, then, that the next verse in Mt. 26 says that they were *exceeding sorrowful*.

Each one recognizing his own weakness and the potential for his own downfall then said one by one to their Lord – *Lord, is it I?* Christ followed these inquiries by saying in v. 24 *The Son of man goeth as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born.* Even Judas who by that time knew what he had done said *Master, is it I?* To whom Christ answered in v. 25 *Thou hast said.*

You know the story that pertains to Judas. He betrayed Christ and eventually perceived the magnitude of his crime. This created so much agony in his heart that he went out and hung himself. It can truly be said of him that his last end was worse than the first. It would be nice to think that betrayals of Christ ended with Judas but as our text this morning in Hebrews indicates to us, the potential for falling away and putting Christ to an open shame still exists. The Hebrew Christians, to whom this epistle is addressed, were on the verge of that very thing.

And if we look at this statement in its context then I think it would be fair to say that those who are not compelled to go on unto perfection face the dreadful potential for falling away that is described in vv. 4-6. Remember the exhortation given in v. 1 *Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God etc.*

The very first word in v. 4 is connected to this exhortation so we could read it this way: *Let us go on unto perfection...For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.*

Let us go on unto perfection or face the dreadful alternative of falling away – that’s the message of the apostle in a nutshell. He teaches us, doesn’t he? – that positive incentive is not the only kind of incentive. There are times when negative incentive serves to add fuel to the fire of our motivation. The apostle, of course, wanted these Hebrew Christians to go on with God and go through with God, the difficulties of their circumstances notwithstanding. And so he describes to them a fate which would be far worse than the difficulties they were facing for the moment. Here is a fate that leaves us far worse off than anything the world can do to us – the fate of falling away, the fate of *crucifying the Son of God afresh and putting him to an open shame*.

I know these words have brought forth a great deal of controversy in the course of church history. I suppose you could say that we enter into an Arminian stronghold in these verses and in a similar portion of Heb. 10. I think, however, that the best approach to such a text is view it in the light of the purpose it’s serving. And it’s clearly serving as a warning to every professing believer. The intention behind the warning is to light a fire in our hearts so that we’ll find ourselves not caving in to despair but we should find ourselves, rather, compelled to go on unto perfection in our walk and service to Christ.

And so I want to deal with this text this warning in the light of what I perceive to be the divine intention behind the text. That intention is not that we view God as something less than sovereign over all or that we ascribe to ourselves a greater degree of autonomy than we actually have. Let’s view the text, rather, in its setting so that we can draw from the warning that it’s designed to convey to us. That warning in a simple sentence could be expressed this way:

### Beware of the Danger of Falling Away

Or if I could express the statement a little more fully with the setting of the statement in view I would express it this way – we must go on unto perfection or beware of the danger of falling away. And in order to encourage you to heed the warning the text presents to us I would have you think with me first of all on:

#### I. The Tragedy of Falling Away

The tragedy of such a fate is magnified by the author of this epistle by the description he gives of the experience of those that in the end still fall away. Note what it says of them in v. 5 – *they were once enlightened*. The simple meaning of the term is that they were instructed. The apostle is not speaking of those that were regenerated but only those that were enlightened. If you keep Judas Iscariot in mind as a prototype of the kind of person here described I think it becomes very helpful.

Judas was instructed, like the other followers of Christ. I have no doubt that like the others he rejoiced in the teachings of Christ and like the others he probably struggled to understand some of the things that Christ taught. If you recall from our studies of the Confession what we said of the elements of true saving faith based on that text in Heb.

11:13 then I think you could say of Judas that he saw the promises and for a time even believed them. Perhaps in his own mind he even embraced them. What I find striking about this passage in Hebrews 6 is that it gives a vivid description of how far a person can seemingly go in his interest in Christ and yet still come short in the end. Or another way to view is to say that a person comes so close to heaven and yet fails to enter. This point is made all the plainer by the next phrase to describe the person that falls away.

Would you notice that not only was he enlightened but *tasted of the heavenly gift*. This is tantamount to saying that he perceived the goodness of God and the goodness of Christ. He could tell to some degree at least that Christ was God's gift sent from heaven and that Christ could and would lead others to heaven. Christ could speak of heaven and of the Kingdom of God in such a way that His hearers couldn't help but perceive the goodness of heaven.

The mark of a good teacher, you see, rests not only in his ability to accurately impart true information about a subject but the teacher is able to impart his own experience in that subject in such a way that his students taste the reality of the things that are taught. And I dare say that when a teacher such as Christ spoke of heaven, He could speak in such a way as to bring the reality of heaven that much closer to His students. And He could do this because He was from heaven.

So the person envisioned in our text is an enlightened person and he's one who has tasted of the heavenly gift. Note also that such persons are *made partakers of the Holy Ghost*. Some commentators take this phrase to mean that they partook of the power that the Holy Ghost imparted during the initial phase of the New Testament church.

We read in the beginning of Mt 10:1 *And when he had called unto [him] his twelve disciples, he gave them power [against] unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease*. And in the next verse the disciples are named and Judas is named with them. In this sense, then, Judas was a partaker of the Holy Ghost.

I don't believe, however, that we have to restrict the application of the statement of being partakers of the Holy Ghost to those who worked miracles in the earliest days of the church. It is the ministry of the third person of the Trinity, after all, to enable us to perceive the truth and taste the goodness of Christ. It is His ministry to convict of sin and convince a man of the goodness of Christ.

I'm reminded of another character in the gospels who responded to the preaching of John the Baptist who I'm sure you'll agree was a spirit-filled preacher. We read of Herod in Mk. 6:20 that *Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly*. Here was a man that was so effected by the preaching of John that he heard him gladly. It appears that John's ministry even had such an impact on Herod that he felt compelled to initiate some kinds of moral reform – *he did many things* the verse says. And so I think you could say that you find an example of a man in Herod who to some degree was enlightened and to

some degree tasted of the heavenly gift, and to a degree was a partaker of the Holy Ghost. Isn't it amazing to see how far a man can come and still come short of salvation. And yet the text goes on to add one more descriptive phrase to such a person. Note what we read in v. 6 that such people *have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come*. They certainly gain the perception to realize that the word of God is good and that better things are coming. They gain the perception to realize that the current state of things is not the final state of things.

And so we're given a very full picture of the knowledge and experience of those that are exposed to the gospel and exposed to Christ. They are depicted as those that are enlightened and those that taste the heavenly gift. They are described as partakers of the Holy Ghost as well as those that sense the good word of God and the powers of the world to come.

This vivid description of such people certainly serves to magnify the tragedy of their falling away. We know from Matthew 7 that there will be many that stand before the Lord on the day of judgment and say to Him *Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name, and in thy name have cast out devils, and in thy name done many wonderful works?* Based on our text here in Hebrews 6 I think we could contribute to the picture on Mt. 7 by saying there will be many who stand before the Lord on that day and will have to confess – *Lord, Lord, we were enlightened by thee, and we tasted of the heavenly gift and were partakers of the Holy Ghost and we tasted the good word of God and the power of the world to come*. And the Lord's word to them will be *I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity*.

What a solemnity this warning in our text takes on. How it should move us to take heed to ourselves. How it should move us to seek Christ all the more for the grace and the power we need to stand true to Him. The potential for such a tragic fall among those that name the name of Christ should compel us to heed Paul's warning to the Corinthians – *Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall*. May we be delivered from the kind of pride that would endanger our souls by leading us into thinking this could never be me.

So we see the tragedy of falling away. The warning in our text becomes even more solemn when we consider next:

## II. The Potential Permanence of Falling Away

Would you notice that our text says with regard to those who have been enlightened and have tasted the good things of God that *It is impossible...if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance*.

The impossibility of such a renewal isn't such a difficult thing to grasp if you remember the setting for these words. The Hebrew Christians were on the verge of abandoning Christianity in order to return to the old apostate form of Judaism that they had grown up with. A return to apostate Judaism would have represented a return to the religion that committed the crime of nailing their Messiah to a cross.

They would have been saying in effect that it was right for their leaders to have crucified Christ. They would be saying in effect that the true Messiah had not yet come and the One that had claimed to be the Messiah had in fact been an imposter who received what He deserved when He was crucified.

The Hebrews who had once professed Christ would now be aligning themselves with those that called for the blood of Christ to be upon them and upon their children. And what was being called for on that occasion was for the guilt of the crime of crucifying Christ to be upon them and their children. These things I've been describing are what I believe the apostle had in mind as he gives the reason why it's impossible for those who fall away to be renewed. Note what it says in v. 6 how *they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.*

You begin to see, then, that we're dealing with an issue here that goes beyond simply falling into sin for a season. And I'm not now suggesting that sin is not a serious thing. Indeed the case may be argued that we put Christ to shame when we fall into sin but what I want you to see here is the peculiar nature of the sin that the apostle has in view. The Hebrews were on the verge of formally denying and repudiating the truth of the gospel of Christ. Such sin was not simply backsliding but apostatizing.

I like the words of John Brown on this passage. Let me give you a rather lengthy quote from him that I think puts this passage in its right perspective. He writes: *If we have succeeded in bringing out the true meaning of this somewhat difficult passage, it must be evident that it says nothing which would warrant a Christian church to refuse to admit into its communion a person who, though he has been guilty even of open apostasy from the faith of Christ, makes a credible profession of his repentance. The person here described is the open, determined apostate; and the statement is, It is impossible, by mere statement of the truth and its evidence, to reclaim him, and it is needless to try it. Nor does it throw any obstacles in the way of an apostate, supposing him to be convinced of his error and guilt, applying to God through Jesus Christ for pardon. This is just what he should do; and if he do it, he is sure of salvation. "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin;" and "He is able to save to the uttermost all that come to God by Him;" and "him that cometh to Him, He will in no wise cast out."*

*If no apostate ever was saved (though we durst not say so), the reason is, he continued in his apostasy, and therefore perished – not, he perished though he sought, but sought in vain, salvation through Christ. Still less is the passage calculated, when rightly understood, to produce those fears which, ill understood, it often has occasioned in the minds of sincere, but weak-minded Christians, who not only have misapprehended the meaning of this text, but the true state of their own minds. They are afraid that they have sinned willfully after they have received the knowledge of the truth, and therefore think there can be no mercy for them. If they would but reflect that the sin described here, and in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter, is a total and voluntary renunciation of Christ and His cause, and a joining with His enemies, their apprehension would be effectually relieved. The passage is also utterly unfit for a purpose to which it has often been applied, to invalidate the*

*doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Nothing is said of the persons here described but what is said of the stony-ground hearers of Lk. 7 – of those who may be destitute of Christian love, 1Cor 13 – or of such as Christ will at last disown as workers of iniquity, Mt. 7.*

The thing I believe that needs to be considered with regard to this serious and solemn warning which is what gives force to this warning is that when a soul departs from Christ he puts himself on the path to attaining what is here described. And though we could not say with certainty just when a soul reaches the point of no return so that his renewal becomes impossible, I think it would be fair to say that at some point he will reach such a point. Like Pharaoh in the Old Testament he will so harden his own heart that God will eventually give him over to that hardened heart and at that point he becomes beyond renewal.

A professing Christian should not even want to aim in the direction of what's being described in these verses. And this leads to my final point. We've seen the tragedy of falling away as well as the potential permanence in falling away. It remains for us to consider that if we would heed the warning that these verses convey to us we should note:

### III. The Alternative to Falling Away

And again I call your attention to the context of the warning that is conveyed to us. It is in the context of going on unto perfection. 6:1 *Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection.* This is not a call to abandon the foundation of Christ but it's a call, rather, to build on the foundation of Christ.

Paul certainly held this hope regarding the Hebrew Christians. Notice what we says in v. 9 – *But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak.* Even though he had issued such a solemn warning that revealed the potential and the awful consequences of falling away Paul was, nevertheless, persuaded better things of the Hebrews. He was hopeful that the things that accompany salvation would be the things that would be manifested in their lives.

We could undoubtedly devote a whole study or even a series of studies to *the things that accompany salvation*. Holiness accompanies salvation. Humility accompanies salvation. Peace and joy accompany salvation. Living right in our several relationships as husbands, wives, children, or parents accompanies salvation.

Clearly then, Paul expected the Hebrew Christians to heed the warning and to practice the alternative to falling away. He expected them to face the right direction and to proceed in that direction. And that direction is given to us in v. 12 where he writes *That ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises.*

That could certainly work as a New Year's resolution for us, couldn't it? Resolved that during the rest of the year 2009 and in the year 2010 I will not allow myself to cave in to spiritual slothfulness but will endeavor to exercise faith and patience in every circumstance of life and in every trial I face. This puts us on the path to pursuing perfection.

But if slothfulness is to be overcome then you must devote yourself to the word of God and you must devote yourself to prayer. And you must devote yourself to practicing what the word teaches. It is slothfulness in these areas that leads to the loss of spiritual vitality. And when spiritual vitality is gone then it does seem as if we're following cunningly devised fables rather than walking in the truth. Our religion becomes something that is reduced to mere academics and theory.

And when the gospel of Christ becomes like a cunningly devised fable then the temptation becomes stronger to leave off following Him. The world becomes more attractive and Christ's cause seems less important. We begin to lose our sense of taste for the heavenly gift and the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come.

May we, therefore, heed the warning and remember our blessings. You have been enlightened and you have tasted of the heavenly gift, and you've been a partaker of the Holy Ghost. Let's follow through, then, on our enlightenment and in our tasting. John Owens draws the distinction between tasting and eating. He notes that *Tasting does not include eating, much less digesting and turning into nourishment what is so tasted.*

Let's determine by God's grace, then, that we'll go even beyond tasting to indulging ourselves in the things of God. May we become spiritually fat and flourishing for in so doing we will certainly guard ourselves from the dreaded potential of falling away. May the Lord Himself, then, stamp His word on our hearts and enable us to hear and heed what He says to us.