

THE SUPREME NEED FOR FRUITBEARING

by Ray C. Stedman

Probably no other passage of Scripture has been the battleground of controversy more often than the sixth chapter of Hebrews. Certainly it has sustained a greater variety of interpretations than any other passage. These range from the most rabid forms of Arminian self-determinism to the extreme of a purely hypothetical instance. But, though good and great men may differ here in the final exposition, all sound scholars will agree on the following hermeneutical principles.

1. The Passage must be interpreted in the light of its immediate context.
2. The message of the book of Hebrews, as a whole, must not be disregarded.
3. Whatever the final result is, it will not be out of harmony with scriptural truth taught elsewhere.

With these general rules before us, we turn to the passage itself.

The touchstone which determines the final interpretation of these verses is the question: "Are those described in Verses 4-6 true Christian believers or only professors?" The answer determines the outcome. For this reason we have chosen to limit this study to an exegesis of these three verses alone though the argument of the whole section must and will be traced.

In accordance with our first rule of interpretation, it is essential to note that this whole warning section from 5:11 to 6:20 is parenthetical, coming in the midst of the writer's discussion of the Melchizedek priesthood of Christ. This discussion of Melchizedek is for the purpose of showing Christ's superiority to the Levitical line of priests, as elsewhere the writer has shown his superiority to angels, Moses, Joshua, and Aaron, and, after this parenthesis, he goes on to speak of a better covenant, a better worship, and a better fellowship than the old order provided. In Hebrews, then, we have the things of the old Jewish order set in constant contrast to the better things of Christ's priesthood, based on, and stemming from, his once-for-all sacrifice. It is important to see this in order to understand the passage before us.

One has not read far in Hebrews before he is aware that one of the chief purposes of the writer is to urge those who yet dawdled with the things of the old order on into full possession of the better things in Christ. Under the Mosaic Law they possessed certain rites and ceremonies which were the best God could give them while they were yet under a schoolmaster, and before the crucifixion and resurrection permitted him to reveal the full glories of the risen Christ. Now that the better things were at hand, coming from the Great High Priest in the heavens, the shadows and types of the old Jewish order are become hindrances rather than blessings. It seems characteristic of the writer that so urgent is his desire to lead his readers on to better things that he is unable to expatiate on the splendors and glories of the new order in Christ without stopping in the middle (as here) to exhort with all earnestness unto the full possession of that of which he speaks.

With this fully in mind we proceed to the actual exposition of the parenthetical exhortation.

I. REPROOF OF IMMATURITY, 5:11-14:

Characteristics of babes:

The immature condition of these Hebrews is evidenced in the title "babe" which the writer applies to them. These are said to be capable of feeding only on the milk of the word and are further designated as being inexperienced in the word of righteousness. There is no disgrace in this itself, but their shame lay in the length of time they had been in that condition (on account of the time).

Characteristics of full-grown men:

Opposed to the spiritual condition of the Hebrews, the writer depicts what they should be, i.e. partakers of solid food who, because they make a habit of exercising their senses, are able to distinguish both good and evil. Had the Hebrews been such, they would not have required the solemn warning which followed.

II. EXHORTATION TO PROGRESS, 6:1-3

The *terminus ad quem* :

The "wherefore" which begins Chapter 6 connects with the characterization of babes and full-grown men which has preceded, and introduces an urgent exhortation to further progress. The goal to which the writer urges is that which pertains to full-growth. This is not elucidated further, but it may be stated in anticipation that it is not what is described in Verses 4-5. But we need not be in doubt as to just what is meant by *perfection*, for, in Hebrews, this word always refers to the result of the work of Christ as High Priest (7:11, 7:19, 10:11-14).

The *terminus a quo* :

More particular attention is paid to the starting point where these Hebrew Christians began. It is termed "the word of the beginning of Christ." It is essential to see that this is so called not in the sense of presenting elementary Christian truths, as many seem to think, but rather foundational principles found in the Old Testament which pointed to Christ. Thus dead works, as we are plainly told in 9:14, refer to the works of the Mosaic Law.

Also "faith in God," though true of the New Testament as well as the Old Testament saint, is usually found in the New Testament, "unto God." It is significant, too, that it does not read "faith in Christ"; that would be the New Testament position, but here it is evidently faith such as that of Abraham that is in view.

The "teaching of baptisms" is also defined in 9:10 as the ceremonial ablutions of the Mosaic ordinances. The plural itself precludes Christian baptism as the subject, especially in view of Ephesians 4:5. The "laying on of hands" has reference to the Old Testament practice of identifying the sins of a sacrificer with the sacrifice (Lev 4:24). This cannot be the Christian practice of laying on of hands in ordination for service as it is here spoken of as connected with "the beginning of Christ," whereas ordination comes later in Christian life and is specifically prohibited to a "novice" (1 Tim 3:6).

Of course, "resurrection of the dead" is a truth common to both Christian and Jewish faith, but that it was an important subject to the Jews, and even a ground of controversy, is seen in the formation of the party of the Sadducees, and our Lord's contention with them as recorded in Matthew 22 proves that resurrection was clearly a subject of Old Testament revelation (Job 19:26, Dan 12:2, Isa 26:19).

Likewise, "eternal judgment" was spoken of in many places in the Old Testament and formed a common subject in Jewish theology.

But all these were to be forsaken, or "departed from," not in the sense of a denial but in the sense of going on to new and greater truths. It was when they "repented from" or changed their minds about these things that they came on to Christian ground. But what was it that brought them to this place of repentance? It was those blessings from the risen Christ which are so clearly described in Verses 4 and 5.

III. WARNING AGAINST REGRESSION, 6:4-8

In this section we come to the heart of this passage, and to that which shall more fully engage our attention. These verses are an explanation of the words "if permits God," as the "for" of Verse 4 indicates. Why does the writer say concerning the need of pressing on, "this will we do, if God permit"? It is because, in the case of some, it is impossible that they should thus press on!

The solemn statement:

The words "impossible to renew" are final. No good purpose is served by any attempts to water down their force. Some would render "impossible" as "difficult," but this, too, is impossible, in view of 6:18 and 11:6. Neither is this merely an hypothetical instance, for the structure of the passage shows that renewal is out of the

question, not simply because it is impossible to fall, as the devotees of the hypothesis theory argue, but because of the terrible results of falling given in Verse 6. Such an interpretation as that this is an hypothesis vitiates all the warning force of the passage, and in effect, construes "impossible" with the participle, "having fallen away."

Let us, however, look first at the blessings received, and then at the resultant actions. Five spiritual privileges are here described which we shall examine in detail:

1. "Those once enlightened"

The accusative case here is due to the infinitive which follows later. Whoever is spoken of here, they have been once for all enlightened. Unquestionably, this enlightenment is the knowledge of the gospel. The same word is used in Second Corinthians 4:4 and 6 where the phrase "light of the gospel" appears. It is used also in Hebrews 10:32 which speaks of the "early days" of a Christian's experience. This passage, in turn, refers back to 10:26 where a "full knowledge of truth" is spoken of on the part of an evident apostate. The same root occurs in John 1:9, "the true light that lighteth every man coming into the world." It is evident, therefore, that the word may be used of either a Christian or an apostate. It is certainly true of both that, in each case, both received a knowledge of the gospel, even a full knowledge, but only one, the Christian, went on to actual possession of salvation. "Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God" {Rom 10:17} is the true order of salvation in every Christian's experience, but this does not guarantee that all who hear will be saved.

2. "Having tasted of the heavenly gift"

The aorist tense suggests a single event in the past which no longer necessarily continues. This thought is true of all the aorist participles here employed. Some have attempted to find support for viewing these as apostates in the thought of mere tasting as opposed to thorough partaking, as one may sip a liquid but not really imbibe it. This is rendered untenable, however, by 2:9, where it is said of Christ "on behalf of all he tasted death." What is this heavenly gift? It is evidently that gift which came from heaven, in short, the Lord Jesus himself. The writer of Hebrews may well be speaking to many who heard the Lord in the days of his flesh. Of all who thus heard the matchless words of grace that fell from his lips and saw his mighty deeds, it could be well said that they had "tasted of the heavenly gift." Further, there is a real sense, even today, in which men may be said to taste of the heavenly gift through a knowledge of the historic person of Christ. Witness the numerous books on Christ written by unbelievers. Thus this phrase, though it may describe a Christian, also just as fully describes one who was almost a Christian.

3. "Partakers become of the Holy Spirit"

This phrase is regarded as conclusive by those who hold that true believers are in view in these verses. This probably arises from the thought that the partaking of the Holy Spirit refers to his indwelling, which is true only of believers. But is such the case? The noun "partakers" occurs but six times in the New Testament, five of these in Hebrews. These are 1:9, 3:1, 3:14, 6:4 and 12:8. In every case except the last, it has the thought of companionship with no necessary implication of unity. In 12:8, the word expresses the thought of "being subject to" (chastisement). Again the aorist suggests an action in the past not now continuing. Had the perfect participle been used, we would have been required to view these as true believers but in view of "having fallen away" it was impossible to use the perfect. We have here then the thought of going along for a brief time with the Holy Spirit, subject to his influence. What is this but conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment as described in John 16:8! Certainly, it is true of every Christian, but it is also true of every apostate as well.

4. "Having tasted the good word of God"

"Word" here refers not so much to the word spoken but the thought expressed in the word. Thayer says "a declaration of one's mind made in word." What is this declaration of the mind of God? We do not think we will be far astray if we take it as that spoken of in the first verse of Hebrews, "God ... hath spoken unto us by [in] his Son," {Heb 1:1-2 KJV}. Here it is not the person of Christ so much as the message He spoke which is in view. In Hebrews, this is the message of assurance based on the unchanging priesthood of Christ (7:25). It is the answer to the question that troubles many convicted souls. "If I accept Christ, can I really live a Christian life?" The "good word" of God declares, "He is

able to save unto the uttermost," {cf, Heb 7:25 KJV}.

5. "Having tasted of the powers of the coming age"

Wherever "power" appears in the plural, it is translated "miracles," "mighty works," "powers (of the heavens)," or "authorities." The thought of supernatural works is in the forefront and we may then translate this phrase, "miracles of the coming age." When we remember that these words were addressed to many who had seen Christ and the apostles open blind eyes, heal the sick, restore the lame, and raise the dead, the phrase is understandable. These mighty works were a fore-gleam of the days when the curse should be lifted from the earth and all creation which now groans in bondage will be freed from the blight of sin. Although these await the coming kingdom age for full manifestation, yet it may be truly said of all, both saved and unsaved, who witnessed the miracles of the apostolic age that they had tasted of the wonders of the coming age. These mighty works were in themselves a guarantee of the ultimate restoration of creation and their testimony remains yet to this day the earnest of God's purpose in days to come.

To summarize our study, we believe we have in these five spiritual privileges the following factors:

1. A knowledge of the gospel.
2. Influenced by the person of Christ.
3. Convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit.
4. Assured of keeping power.
5. Convinced of an ultimate restoration.

Are these descriptive of a Christian? Unquestionably, "Yes!" But not exclusively so, for they are also descriptive of one who came to the point of becoming a Christian but turned back.

Now, before we give a final answer to the question of whether these are spoken of as true believers or apostates, let us look at the actions which ensue upon receipt of these five blessings:

- Does it say they accepted Christ?
- Does it say they showed forth the fruit of the Holy Spirit in their lives?
- Does it say they continued in the faith?

No, none of these. The next word is "and having fallen away." We cannot regard this as a conditional participle, "if they shall fall away," for two reasons:

1. Such a rendering does not make good sense. The evident argument is that it is impossible to renew these, not "if they shall fall away" but, "because they have fallen away";
2. The presence of the "and" relates this word indivisibly to the whole series of actions expressed by the aorist participles preceding. They are all viewed as one accomplished event. A conditional participle here would require a slight change of thought and would omit the "and."

This falling away is characterized by two things:

- (1) Those who fall away are thereby crucifying on their part the Son of God again; and
- (2) Are putting him to open ignominy.

Are these things the normal results to be expected from the blessings received? Quite the contrary, they are clearly not a result of the blessings but reveal something drastically wrong in the ones being thus blessed.

Let us now review our ground briefly: We find listed in Verses 1-3 a number of things pertaining to the old Jewish order which once represented the highest form of true religion. How those whom the writer addresses have come to a place where they have changed their minds (repented) concerning the value of these Jewish things. What brought them to this place of repentance? It was the new truths which they had heard as outlined in Verses 4-5. But note, repentance is called the "foundation" of the word of Christ, i.e. the place of

beginning, and the five blessings of Verses 4-5 but bring one to the threshold of a true Christian experience. Some among them had stood at that place and then fallen away from it. This is evident from the use of "again." Evidently they had once been to the place where they were ready to change their minds about Jewish things, but had fallen back into these now useless practices. The phrase "again to renew unto repentance" of Verse 6 thus answers to the "again foundation to lay of repentance" of Verse 1. Obviously, then, the five privileges of 4-5 are not what is termed "that which belongs to full growth" but are the truths which bring one to the place of turning from the old, useless religious rites to face the decision of going on to be Christian. The ones spoken of here are not Christians, however, for though they once stood at the place of decision, they fell back into their old practices.

Now the solemn sentence is pronounced:

"It is impossible to renew them again to repentance." Why? Because God has already expended upon them his total persuasive powers and it was not sufficient. What more can he do? Even the most conclusive evidence, sufficient even to obtain full mental assent, is not enough to move their hardened and obdurate will. If that does not suffice, what can? But not only is there no possibility of saving them; they cannot even be brought as far as they once were. This need not be the ground of despair to those who perhaps in their youth rejected the claims of the gospel but still feel at times the urging of the Holy Spirit to receive Christ. It is evident such have not yet been brought to the full knowledge of the truth. It may take a lifetime before God is able to bring one to that place, but when once it is reached we have the solemn assurance of God that he who then rejects has sealed his doom forever. This agrees exactly with the words of 10:26: "For if we sin willfully after receiving the knowledge [full knowledge] of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation." This word "full knowledge" appears again in Second Peter 2:20 which also speaks of apostates, showing that it is only when that stage is reached and rejected that the divine rejection follows.

The severity of such a sentence is rendered understandable by the closing phrases of Verse 6. Those who, in the blazing light of grace streaming down from the great King-Priest in the glory, reject the claims and promises of Christ, and turn back to Jewish rites are thereby crucifying Christ again, and openly despising him. We take "crucifying for themselves" as a dative of advantage, "crucifying for themselves" or on their part. Each Jewish lamb slain after Calvary is still a type of the death of God's Lamb, but after the real has come, in effect, denies the efficacy of it. Hence those who turn from Christ to Judaism are really saying, "This little lamb here is the true sacrifice; that One on yonder hill was of no value, and simply marks the deserved death of an impostor." To thus speak is to publicly put to shame him whom God had exalted to the highest heights of glory. The impossibility of their salvation rests then on two things:

- (1) God has already done all he could to bring them to a decision for Christ but in vain; and
- (2) They are crucifying again and shaming the only One by whom they could be saved.

Again this agrees with 10:29: "Of how much greater punishment, think ye, shall he be judged worthy who has trodden under foot the Son of God and esteemed the blood of the covenant wherewith he was sanctified an unholy thing, and has done despite to the Spirit of grace?" It is impossible to tone down the solemnity of these fearful words!

Before going on to consider the illustration the writer gives, it is noteworthy to observe that the words "having fallen away," "to renew," "crucifying," and "putting to shame," occur only here in the New Testament. In each case, they are intensified forms, but their very rarity may indicate that such terrible apostasy is not too frequent. The last two are in the present tense, not because they thus indicate that the apostates will continue in their rejection, but rather because that is all they can do. The present tenses thus emphasize the "impossible."

The illustration:

In Verses 7 and 8, the writer adds an illustration to bring out his exact meaning. It is important to see that this illustration is designed to fit the whole picture, not merely Verses 4 and 5. It is only the latter part of the illustration that illustrates the teaching of 4-5. The author pictures two plots of ground, side by side, both of which receive abundant rain from heaven. One plot produces useful herbs for the sake of those who till it, and is thereby blessed of God. This type of ground pictures those of whom the writer speaks in Verse 9, "We are

persuaded better things concerning you, beloved, and things connected with salvation." The second plot receives the same amount of rain as the first, but the results are thorns and briars. This answers to the apostates described in Verses 4-5. Note their final end as depicted in the illustration: They, being found worthless, are "nigh to a curse," i.e. their life may be prolonged for awhile but they face the inevitable curse of eternal damnation in the everburning lake of fire. The rain from heaven, of course, in each case corresponds to the five spiritual privileges described in 4-5. The very fact that this rain falls equally on both plots of ground proves that the blessings of 4-5 are not exclusively for Christians. As we are told elsewhere, "the rain falleth upon the just and the unjust alike." It is the rain which makes it possible for the ground to bear fruit, but the kind of fruit borne rests with the ground itself. It is clear from this that fruitbearing is the one unmistakable mark of the Christian, and it is because of this that the writer so strongly urges his hearers on to such a state.

The remarkable fidelity with which this illustration fits the whole picture is but another proof that we have the right interpretation. Using the figures of the illustration, it is clearly evident why it is impossible to renew apostates unto repentance. What is the use of pouring more rain upon land which even though it has had an abundance already can produce nothing but thorns and briars? More rain, in such a case, means only more thorns. The trouble is not with the lack of rain but with the ground. It has never received the good seed of the word by which it can bring forth fruit. It is therefore disapproved and designated for burning. Note that "rejected," "cursed," and "whose end is burning" all refer to the subject of "bringeth forth" (faith understood) and not to "thorns" and "briars." It is, therefore, not the thorns and briars which are burned, but the earth itself, so not the fruits of the apostates, but the apostates themselves. If we are asked to identify the thorns and briars we reply in the words of our Lord, "the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches," {Mark 4:19 KJV}. Oh, the awful folly of knowing the things of God but not receiving them into the heart!

IV. ENJOINMENT TO FRUITBEARING, 6:9-12

Recognition of fruit:

As we have already seen, the writer recognizes that some among those he is addressing have already brought forth the unmistakable sign of fruit. This fruit he terms, "your work, and the love which ye have shown to his name, having ministered to the saints and still ministering." It is the sight of this fruit that causes him to declare, "We are persuaded better things of you, beloved, though we speak" (that is, though we speak so harshly as to appear to regard none among you as truly saved). The evidence of fruit has convinced him that some are genuinely saved. That he views two distinct groups is clear from the change of pronouns. In Verses 4-6, when speaking of apostates, he uses the third person, "they," "them," and the third person plural endings; but when he speaks of the saved among them he says, "you," "you," and the second person plural endings.

Exhortation to diligence:

Because the need for true fruit is so vital, the writer declares he passionately desires for each of his hearers that he will press on into the full assurance of hope. The good seed has been sown and they are to receive it into their hearts, not merely their heads, that when the blessings of God lead them to the place of decision they may bring forth true fruit and not thorns and briars.

It may not be amiss in concluding this study to point out how fully the interpretation we have presented agrees with Scripture elsewhere. We have already noted the close parallel between Chapter 10 and Chapter 6, we have seen also how this agrees with the parable of the sower of Matthew 13.

It is instructive to note that John speaks of apostates thus, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us," (1 Jn 2:19 {KJV}).

Jude says, "These are spots in your feasts of charity, when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear: clouds they are without water, carried about of winds; trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots, raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever," {Jude 1:12-13 KJV}.

Peter says, "For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge [full

knowledge], of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them," (2 Pet 2:20-21 {KJV}).

Paul describes them thus, "Now as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith. But they shall proceed no further: for their folly shall be manifest unto all men, as theirs also was," (2 Tim 3:8-9 {KJV}).

Our poor words could add no more solemn warning than is here.

May God grant men grace to flee to the place of safety in Christ while there is yet time.

Today the Savior calls,
For refuge fly!
The storm of justice falls,
And death is nigh!

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