

Pressing on to Maturity Part II

Warning Against "Falling Away"

- ³ And this we will do if God permits.
- ⁴ **For it is impossible**, in the case of those who have **once been enlightened**, who have **tasted the heavenly gift**, and have **shared in the Holy Spirit**,
- ⁵ and have **tasted the goodness of the word of God** and **the powers of the age to come**,
- ⁶ and then **have fallen away**, **to restore them again to repentance**, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.
- ⁷ For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God.
- ⁸ But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.
- ⁹ Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things-- things that belong to salvation."
- ¹⁰ For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.
- ¹¹ And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end,
- ¹² so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises."

Hebrews 6:3-12

Losing Salvation and Hebrews 6:4-9

ONE OF THE MOST EXISTENTIALLY difficult questions a Christian can ask is, “Can I lose my salvation?” It is difficult for obvious reasons. The very question can create fear, terror, paralysis, and hopelessness in a person’s heart. Especially if the answer is, “Yes!” Christians have probably been asking this question since the very beginning. Let’s look at a very brief survey.

Roman Catholics believe you can lose your salvation. They believe that a person can commit **mortal sins**. These are sins that involve a deliberate rejection of God and his laws as opposed to sins that you don’t really think about doing. Committing a mortal sin causes you to shatter sanctifying grace entirely and thereby lose your salvation, which is only regained by confessing your sin to a priest and partaking of the necessary sacraments again.

Roman Catholics are semi-Pelagians, meaning that while we need grace to be saved, the human will takes the first step in the Christian life, and God’s grace only supervenes later on. To put it another way, faith comes

before regeneration. In our own tradition, something very similar came to the forefront in the year 1610. On this date, some of the Reformed churches of Holland, following the lead of a man named **James** (Jacobus) **Arminius**, pastor in Amsterdam and professor at the University of Leiden, wrote a series articles that came to be known as *The Remonstrance*. A “remonstrance” is a forceful protest of something.

These *Remonstrance* came the year after Arminius had died. Some forty-six preachers and two professors signed a document that took the form of **five articles**. In these articles, these “**Arminians**” were protesting five traditional doctrines of the Reformed churches. This protest was followed by five articles that were the result of a Synod (an assembly of clergy) of over 100 pastors (I’ve seen the number at 102), including 27 pastors from outside Holland from places like Switzerland, Britain, and Germany (France had a set of empty chairs at the delegation in honor of the pastors invited but unable to attend because the government of France wouldn’t allow it). The point I want to make here is that Arminianism has its roots in the Reformed churches of the Reformation.

The Synod that responded to the Remonstrance was called the **Synod of Dort** (creatively named after its location). Today, due in part to the popular 20th century acronym called **TULIP**,¹ and because “Arminianism” is a house-hold word in many circles, something of the substance of their protest is still known today. I’m only interested in the fifth protest today. As put from the Reformed perspective, the fifth article is known as **Eternal Security** or **Perseverance of the Saints** or **Perseverance of the Savior** or other such things. Therefore, the Remonstrance believed that, yes, a person can lose their salvation.²

¹ The idea of the “**Five Points of Calvinism**” has been around for a very long time, never as a mere acronym, but as substantive, nuanced responses of the Remonstrance. On the other hand, the T.U.L.I.P. has only been around for about a hundred years. **Jonathan Moore** writes, “**The ‘T.U.L.I.P.’ acronym appears to have originated no earlier than a 1905 lecture in New Jersey by Dr. Cleland Boyd McAfee (1866-1944), a leading Presbyterian minister in Brooklyn, New York.**” (**William H. Vail**, “The Five Points of Calvinism historically considered,” *The Outlook* 104, May-August [1913]: 394). For the first influential popularization of this acronym, still in print to this day, see **Loraine Boettner**, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1932), 59-60, 150-161.” **Jonathan Moore**, “The Extent of the Atonement: English Hypothetical Universalism versus Particular Redemption,” in *Drawn into Controversie*, ed. Michael A.G. Haykin and Mark Johns (Oakville, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 146, n. 98. See also **Kenneth J. Stewart**, “The Points of Calvinism: Retrospect and Prospect,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 26.2 (2008): 187-203.

Available from http://www.covenant.edu/docs/faculty/Stewart_Ken/Points%20of%20Calvinism%20Retrospect%20and%20Prospect.pdf; Internet; accessed 5 August 2013; and **Richard A. Muller**, “Was Calvin a Calvinist? Or, Did Calvin (or Anyone Else in the Early Modern Era) Plant the ‘TULIP?’”, Available from <http://www.calvin.edu/meeter/Was%20Calvin%20a%20Calvinist-12-26-09.pdf>; Internet; accessed 5 August 2013.

² The language they use is quite nuanced and careful, but nevertheless teaches this. Article 5: “**Those who are ingrafted into Christ by true faith and as a consequence have been made**

Arminians to this day follow this teaching. And again, this fits their more basic premise of **semi-Pelagianism**, wherein man makes the first step in his salvation.³ It only logical, right? If man has the uninhibited, untainted freewill to choose God, why wouldn't he have the same to "un-choose" God?

Strangely (to me), **Lutherans** who are not at all semi-Pelagian (confessionally speaking), often seem to agree. Though they believe in election like we do, even the most conservative synods like the LCMS says, "**believes and**

participants of His life-giving Spirit, have been abundantly equipped by this power, by which they are able to fight against Satan, sin, the world, and their flesh, and therefore also obtain the victory over them; nevertheless always (because we wish to be careful) assisted in every temptation by the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit; and Jesus Christ Himself, through His Spirit, holds out His hand, and (if only they are prepared to fight themselves, and beseech His help, and do not desert Him themselves), secures and confirms them, so that they are seduced by no deceit or power of Satan, nor are able to be ripped out of the hands of Christ, according to the word of Christ: "No one takes my sheep out of my hand" (John 10:28). As for the rest, whether they themselves are not able through carelessness την αρχην της υποστασεως χριστου καταλειπειν (to abandon the beginning of their subjection to Christ), and embracing again this present world, to forsake the holy doctrine once delivered to them, to let a good conscience slip away, and to despise grace; must be more accurately sought from the sacred Scripture before we are able to teach others with πληροφορια (full persuasion) of our minds." **James T. Dennison Jr.**, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation: 1523–1693*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008–2014), 43–44.

³ This probably needs to be nuanced in that in an objective sense, God made the first step by sending Jesus to die for the whole world. Arminians, of course, do not deny this and it is a major point earlier on in their Remonstrance. Many of the Reformed at Dort actually agreed with this point of the Remonstrance, though they did not agree that the Arminians understood this rightly. The objective death of Christ is not the only thing God did. God also desired to save a whole group of people that would not have chosen him otherwise. This is what the Remonstrants denied, and it lead them logically to deny eternal security.

teaches that it is possible for a true believer to fall from faith, as Scripture itself soberly and repeatedly warns us (1 Cor 10:12; 1 Pet 5:8; 2 Pet 3:17; Heb 2:1-3; 3:12-19; 6:4-8, etc.). Such warnings are intended for Christians who appear to be lacking a right understanding of the seriousness of their sin and of God's judgment against sin, and who, therefore, are in danger of developing a false and proud 'security' based not on God's grace, but on their own works, self-righteousness, or freedom to 'do as they please.'" Yet, they also say, "To those who are truly repentant and recognize their need for God's grace and forgiveness, such passages are powerful reminders of the true security that is ours through sincere and humble faith in Christ alone for our salvation."⁴ Yet, because they believe in election and this seems logically to contradict what was just said, you will find people saying that Lutherans deliberately believe in contradictory doctrine, not caring to harmonize them or more simply that you find some Lutherans affirming that you can lose it and others denying it.⁵

⁴ *LCMS: Frequently Asked Questions*, "Can you lose your salvation" (St. Louis, MO: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod), p 13.

⁵ Note the potentially careful wording here. They said you can "fall from faith" but not necessarily that you can "lose your salvation." The article concludes by saying, "A person may be restored to faith in the same way he or she came to faith in the first place: by repenting of

So we can see the plenty of people have believed that a person can lose their salvation. On the other hand, we Reformed and many Evangelicals have strongly argued that this is not possible. Because there are so many clear passages that God will not lose any of those he has elected and that the Son will not lose any given to him, and based then on the premise that God's word does not contradict itself, we believe it simply doesn't make any sense to hold such a doctrine. It forces you to deny some parts of Scripture.

So what do we do about a passage like Hebrews 6:4ff? This text has often been used as ground zero by all the groups who believe you can lose your salvation. If this were true, then it would contradict other passages that say this is not possible. Passages like what? How about any passage that talks about “eternal” life (John 3:16, 36; 5:24; 6:47; etc.)? If it is eternal, how can it cease to be eternal by losing it? That makes no sense. Eternal life can't be lost by definition. “I give them eternal life, and they shall never

his or her sin and unbelief and trusting completely in the life, death and resurrection of Christ alone for forgiveness and salvation. Whenever a person does repent and believe, this always takes place by the grace of God alone and by the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word in a person's heart.” When I read this entire quote which is intended to answer the question “Can you lose your salvation,” I come away utterly confused. They never really answer the question!

perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28). Or what about something like Romans 8:35 which asks, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” and then answers that nothing “in all creation will be able to separate us.” Wouldn’t that include myself? There are so many verses on this that it is really overwhelming.⁶

But my purpose today is not to defend this doctrine *per se*. Rather, it is to look at Hebrews 6:4ff., and to try and understand it. Since it is so often said to be talking about losing salvation, rather than just start defending the text against the charge, I want to ask the question, “Is this what it is even talking about in the first place?” Is this warning telling the hearers that they are in danger of losing their salvation?

Why would people think that it is? The answer seems to be the phrase “have fallen away...” (Heb 6:6). In the context, there are a certain group of people (called “those” in vs. 4) who participate in certain kinds of things (listed in vv. 4-6) who “fall away” (6) and because of the nature of their sin it becomes “impossible” (4) “to restore them again

⁶ See for example the compilation in David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and Roger Nicole, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended and Documented* (Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1963), 57–60.

to repentance” (6) because they “are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt” (6). The things they participate in seem to presuppose that these people are Christians. The “falling away,” many people simply assume, refers something called “apostasy.” Thus, the passage teaches that you can lose your salvation.

As we look at the passage, we will unfold it in the following order. First, we will try to identify the people he is talking about. Second, we will try to figure out the actual sin being committed. Third, we will look at the OT for help. Fourth, we will look at the illustration given at the end of the warning.

Who are the people in mind?

The first question we want to ask is, “Who are the people he has in mind?” There are really only two answers that can be given. 1. He is talking about Christians, truly saved believers in Jesus Christ. This is the universal Arminian answer, because without it, you don’t have people losing salvation. 2. These people are not Christians

at all. This is what Reformed Christians have said. Some, however, have been more careful than just saying they aren't Christians, because you could say that about a Hindu or a Muslim. These people are not Hindus or Muslims. By "more careful" I mean that these are people who confess Christ and "believe" like Simon the sorcerer ([Acts 8:13](#)). They are believers in an outward, visible sense, but their hearts have never been truly changed. My own thought is that [Hebrews](#) assumes that the first group is who he is talking to, though like any visible group called "Christians," there will almost surely be category two there as well.

How can I say that these are truly Christians? Wouldn't I be in the Arminian camp and believe that you would have to have people losing their salvation? Live with that tension for a while, because we aren't ready to answer it. What we need to do first is see why the context might teach that true Christians are in mind.

Much has been said in the letter itself about the people Hebrews is talking to. In our first meeting with the audience, the Apostle includes himself among the group referring to them all together as "we". "[We have heard](#)" and

“we must pay closer attention” “lest we drift away” (Heb 2:1). He calls them all “holy brothers” (3:1). These are people who have all made a “confession” of faith (3:1; 4:4; cf. 10:23), who all have the “confidence” and “boasting” of the gospel (3:6, 14).

Then, in the immediate context he has just called the “dull of hearing” (5:11), not meaning unsaved but rather “children” in the faith and those who drink “milk” and are thus immature (5:13). They have known and confessed the basics (6:1-2) of the “good news” (cf. 4:2) and therefore it can be said of them all that they have “believed” (4:3). After our passage today, he goes on to day things like “We desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end” (6:11). He then tells them not to be “sluggish, but imitators of those who by faith inherit the promises” (12). This is the audience of the warning passage today, and he assumes that they are Christians. As he concludes, “Beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation” (9).

But it does *seem* that there could be another group of people here as well. This group is part of the first group in that they confess the faith, know the basics, have heard the

good news, and so on. Here are some of the other things that have been said. Though they have all “believed,” he has clearly been warning them of having “evil, unbelieving” hearts that lead them to “fall away” from the living God (3:12). He says, “We have come to share in Christ, if in deed we hold our original confidence firm to the end” (3:14). Or, “We are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence” (3:6). In other words, like other parts of the NT, if they don’t, it proves they never did come to share in Christ, they prove they were never really God’s house (cf. 1Jn 2:19; 2Pe 2:20-21; Jude 1:19; etc.). These kinds of people “always go astray in their heart” and “have not known [God’s] ways” (3:10). But is this group the focus of this warning? Is this warning for them? I don’t think so.

The main thing to understand is that Hebrews does not single out one group over another. He addresses them all together. The Apostle assumes that they are all saved! He assumes that the warning is for all of them. Indeed, I think it is. The reason this can be is because the immediate context of this warning is Christians moving on to maturity rather than staying immature like infants who drink milk. If this context is not kept in mind, we can make the passage say

almost anything we want it to say.

With this, I want to look into **the meaning of the five things** that everyone in this group has participated in, for these things are what tells us in our own passage who he is talking about. The five things are:

1. They have “**once been enlightened**” (6:4)
2. They have “**tasted the heavenly gift**” (6:4)
3. They have “**shared in the Holy Spirit**” (6:4)
4. They have “**tasted the goodness of the word of God**” (6:5)
5. They have “**tasted ... the powers of the age to come**” (6:5)

What do these things mean?

They have once been enlightened (*φωτισθέντας; photisthentas* from *photidzo*). By at least the second century A.D. “enlightened” came to be used as a word for “**baptism.**” **Justin Martyr** (100 – 165 AD) uses it this way, and said that others before him did too.⁷ Thus, the first-

⁷ “And this washing is called illumination (Ὁ φωτισθεῖς; *ha photistheis*), because they who learn these things are illuminated in their understandings” (Justine, *First Apology* 61). And “... in order

second century Syriac translation of the NT known as the Peshitta (meaning “simple version”) actually translates the word as “baptism.”⁸ And yet, if the word is used that way here, it would be the only example in the NT or LXX.⁹

This is a word for “light,” and in these and other places, the word is used to describe a turning “from sin to God” or from “ignorance to knowledge” or from “death to life.”¹⁰ “The commandment of the Lord is bright, enlightening the eyes” (Ps 19:8 LXA). “For thou, O Lord, wilt light my lamp: my God, thou wilt lighten my darkness” (Ps 18:28 LXA). “The manifestation of thy words will enlighten, and instruct the simple” (Ps 119:130 LXA). “O Lord my God: lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep in death” (Ps 13:3 LXA). These are the cries and sayings of a converted man, which of course is what is supposed to be true at baptism. Hebrews

that we may offer hearty prayers in common for ourselves and for the baptized [illuminated] person” (*First Apology* 65).

⁸ “But they who have once descended to baptism...” Horace L. Hastings and Isaac H. Hall, *The Syriac New Testament Translated into English from the Peshitto*, trans. James Murdock, Ninth Edition. (Boston: H. L. Hastings & Sons, 1915), Heb 6:4.

⁹ Chrysostom makes the interesting observation that “heretics have baptism but not enlightenment” (Chrysostom, Homily on John 1:1: βάπτισμα ... ἔχουσιν, οὐ φῶτισμα). Cf. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 208.

¹⁰ See the many lists and references in C. R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 36 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 313-14.

says that these people have been enlightened. It happened “once” just like the initial act of faith and repentance and regeneration and baptism (which symbolizes them).

They have tasted the heavenly gift. Similar to the former word, many think that this is a poetic way of referring to the **Lord’s Supper**. Yet, also like the last word, many have argued that this is a way of describing **salvation**. “Tasting” does not seem to mean merely putting it on your tongue, but actually eating and drinking, like Paul did when the word is used in **Acts 20:10**.¹¹ In **Hebrews 2:9** Jesus “tasted” **death**. He really died. He experienced it personally to the core of his being. Peter talks about salvation this way. They are those who have “tasted” that the Lord is good (**1Pe 2:3**). Therefore, as Hughes says in the *WTJ*, “‘To taste,’ is appropriate to an experience that is real and personal.” (cf. Hughes, *WTJ* 35 [1973] 141).¹²

They have shared in the Holy Spirit. As in the first two, the idea can be corporate. The Holy Spirit descends upon the congregation when they meet together. He is in their midst.

¹¹ “... and having come up, and having broken bread, and having tasted, for a long time also having talked...” (Acts 20:10 YLT).

WTJ Westminster Theological Journal

¹² William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, vol. 47A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 141.

To “share” is a word that often refers to close fellowship. The disciples had “partners” on their boats (Luke 5:7). “If one falls, the other will lift up his companion” (Ecc 4:10). Thus, like the first two, it seems that these people have had fellowship with the Holy Spirit. Again, it could very easily be a mark of a Christian.

They have tasted the goodness of the word of God. Again, tasting comes back into view. Again, it can have a corporate sense and many have seen here an indirect reference to preaching. We have seen that these people have had the good news preached to them. We have seen that they all know the basics of the faith, the milk of the word. If a person professes faith, is baptized, takes the Supper, partakes of the Holy Spirit, these things do not happen apart from the word of God. But not only have they heard it, they have tasted its goodness. That the word of God is good to them is important, because they have not been despisers and mockers of God’s word.

They have tasted the powers of the age to come. Tasting the powers is assumed here, as the one word modifies both phrases. Powers is plural. It is “powers” not just “power.” “In the biblical and post-biblical literature these powers

include →angels, →demons, →stars, →Stoicheia, and the →Holy Spirit; in the NT, in addition, →Christ is integrated in the hierarchy.”¹³ In the NT, the powers of the age to come are Christ who has come down out of heaven and the Spirit whose age we have moved into. When God’s people gather together, the Spirit comes in power to lead, teach, comfort, and judge the people. They are literally tasting of heavenly, future things now. But in the NT itself, some of these people may very well have witnessed the miracles that we find throughout the book of Acts. Because of them, they may have converted. Certainly, they have known these things personally, for that is what it means to taste them.

So we can see that there is a corporate nature to all of these things, and yet there is also an individual dimension. While some who are baptized, take the Supper, hear the word and so on are not true believers, the weight of the exegetical evidence—apart from coming to the text with a theological bias—I believe is on the side that these people are genuine Christians. Reformed Christians have seen this.

¹³ H. D. Betz, “Dynamis,” ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999), 268.

Wayne Grudem says, “There is nothing negative in the description: the terms all indicate positive events that are generally experienced by people who become Christians.”¹⁴ But if that is true, what is it that the passage says happens to them?

The Meaning of “Falling Away”

The key here is the term “falling away” (*parapipto*). But falling away from what? If they are Christians, is it salvation? Is that the warning? Without ever doing the exegetical work to find out the answer, most on both sides of the “losing salvation” debate just seem to assume that this is what is in mind. But is it?

The whole phrase is this, “For it is impossible [for those who have had these five things happen to them] ... and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own

¹⁴ Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study from Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Other Warning Passages of Hebrews,” in *The Grace of God and the Bondage of the Will*, vol. 1, ed. Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 139 [133-182]. This is also the way the Fathers took it. “See *Shepherd of Hermas*, Commandment 4.3; Tertullian, *On Modesty*, 20 (*ANF* 4.97); and Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* ii.13, who in speaking on Heb 10:26, said God grants to those who are “in faith,” meaning Christians, “a second repentance,” if they fall into sin.” Allen, 354, n. 315.

harm and holding him up to contempt.” “Impossible” is a very strong word and it means just what you think it means. One of the problems with all three groups above (Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Arminians) who teach that you can lose your salvation, is that this passage says it is impossible to restore them again to repentance. If this is talking about salvation, then why do all three of these groups teach that people can come back into salvation after they have lost it? It is rare to find someone who teaches that once lost, it can never be regained.

But maybe this is talking about **the unforgivable sin** that we find in the Gospels? In those places, it is very clear that the sin Jesus is talking about is **blasphemy of the Holy Spirit**. Jesus makes it clear that this sin is **attributing the works of God to Satan**. It is not possible for a Christian to commit this sin. (And if you are worried that you have, you certainly haven't). Besides that, there is nothing said here at all about attributing the works of God to Satan. So that isn't what is in mind.

Almost everyone assumes that “falling away” refers to apostasy. Apostasy is defined as “**abandoning or renouncing your religious beliefs**.” It is a revolt or a defection. I've

known a couple of people over the years who have done this. They were Christians, and suddenly, they renounced it all. It is what apparent believers commit, but even apparent believers who commit apostasy *might* still be brought back to repentance. The Apostle says, “some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme” (1Ti 1:19).¹⁵ His hope is that they will eventually return. At the end of the day, however, the NT makes it clear that if they do not return it is because they “were never among us” (1Jn 2:19). Apostasy is only committed by falsely professing believers.

If the term “falling away” is what is said to refer to apostasy, it would make sense to see how the word is used in other places. As Dr. Allen has said—one of the few who has actually bothered to do a word study in a commentary on Hebrews—“The immediate, book, canon, and wider extra-biblical contexts are not in favor of the meaning “apostasy.”¹⁶ This is the only occurrence of the word in the

¹⁵ The sin in this text is “blasphemy,” and apostasy is a sub-class of blasphemy. Shipwrecking the faith seems very much like apostasy, though in 2 Timothy another sin of Hymenaeus is mentioned. There we find that he has been teaching others that the resurrection has already happened.

¹⁶ David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing

NT, but it appears eight times in the LXX.¹⁷ People **fall from wisdom**, from their own **words**, they fall into **sin**. It appears 106 times in extra-biblical Classical Greek, fifty-seven times in extra-biblical Koine Greek and it often refers to sin, but it never refers even a single time to apostasy. The sin involved most times in the Bible is *ma'al*, which means “**to act unfaithfully**.” For example, **Ezek 20:27** talks about “falling away” against the Lord by profaning the **Sabbath and by idolatry**. In other words, if the word means apostasy here, it would be the only time it was ever used that way in all of known ancient Greek of the NT and prior era.¹⁸

Now, there is also a clear relationship between this word (again, used only here in the NT) and the word “**to fall**” (*parapipto* vs. *pipto* and *apistemi*¹⁹) in 4:11 and 3:12. The verses are, “**Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the**

Group, 2010), 390. I am indebted to Dr. Allen’s treatment of this passage. It is thorough and compelling.

¹⁷ **Est 6:10; Wis 6:9, 12:2; Ezek 14:13; 15:8; 18:24; 20:27; 22:4.**

¹⁸ For the whole study see Allen, 359-63.

¹⁹ Like *parapipto* which translates *ma'al* and does not refer to apostasy, so also *apistemi* sometimes translates the same word. For example, king Uzziah burns incense in the temple when he is not a priest. He is commanded to go forth from the sanctuary because he has “departed” from the Lord and there will be no glory in it for him (**2Ch 26:18 LXX**). He sinned, yes. He was unfaithful. But this was not the sin of apostasy. In fact, the king was most likely doing it in the Name of the LORD.

living God” (Heb 3:12). “Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience” (Heb 4:11). Now, this sounds like maybe people are losing their salvation or perhaps committing apostasy. But the key to knowing exactly what is going on is to go back to the OT and find out.

Israel in the Wilderness

Kadesh Barnea. This was an important location for quite a number of events in the days of Moses. It was from here that the spies were sent out (Num 13:1-26). It was from here that Moses disobediently struck the rock that brought forth water (Num 20:11). God told Aaron and Moses that they would not enter the Promised Land because of what they did here (Num 20:12). Miriam (Num 20:1) and Aaron (Num 20:22-29) both died here.

This is the place that Psalm 95 is reflecting on.²⁰ Why does that matter? Because Psalm 95 is what is quoted in Hebrews 3-4. Hebrews has in mind the unfaithful events of Kadesh Barnea. Now, there are some very interesting

²⁰ The psalm mentions Massah and Meribah (Ps 95:8). These are in Kadesh (Num 27:14).

parallels between the events in Kadesh and the Exodus and the list of five in Hebrews 6:4-5. Consider:

- "And thou guidedst them by day by a pillar of cloud, and by night by a pillar of fire, to enlighten for them the way wherein they should walk. (Neh 9:12 LXA; cf. Ex 13:21-22)
- "And the children of Israel ate manna forty years, until they came to the land they ate the manna, until they came to the region of Phoenicia." (Ex 16:35 LXA)
- "And thou gavest thy good Spirit to instruct them, and thou didst not withhold thy manna from their mouth, and gavest them water in their thirst." (Neh 9:20 LXA; cf. Num 11:16-29)
- "Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass." (Josh 21:45) and "Also thou camest down upon mount Sina, and thou spakest to them out of heaven, and gavest them right judgments, and laws of truth, ordinances, and good commandments." (Neh 9:13 LXA; for Moses and the word see Heb 12:19)
- "But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt," (Ex 7:3)

Hebrews	Kadesh Barnea and the Exodus
“Enlightened” (<i>photidzo</i> ; 6:4)	“Pillar of fire” (<i>photidzo</i> ; Neh 9:12)
“Tasted the heavenly gift” (6:4)	Manna in the wilderness (Ex 16:4; etc.)
“Shared in the Holy Spirit” (6:4)	Gave the Holy Spirit (Neh 9:20)
“Tasted the goodness of the word” (6:5)	God’s good words to Israel (Josh 21:45)
“Tasted the powers of the age to come (6:5)	“Signs and wonders” (Ex 7:3)

The parallels between Hebrews’ list and the Exodus are almost eerie. Unless, of course, he still has the whole Exodus event in mind in this warning. And why shouldn’t he? It has served the Christians well to remember what happened there so that they do not repeat it.

But now, I want to ask perhaps the most important question today. Just what exactly happened in the failure of Israel to enter God’s rest? Particularly, **did the people lose their salvation?** People often think this because the word “unbelief” is associated with all of this in Hebrews. The people didn’t believe God. Therefore, they weren’t Christians or perhaps they lost their salvation. However, we need to remember what God told Moses and Aaron. “**Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them**” (Num

20:12). Moses didn't believe in the Lord. It says it right there. Moses didn't enter the "rest" of the Promised Land. Therefore, Moses lost his salvation? No. Hebrews 11 makes it clear (like it even needed to), that Moses was a man of faith. What happened is something else. That "something else" can be explained, in part, by the illustration that comes after the warning in Hebrews 6:7-8.

The Illustration of the Land

As the illustration tells us, there is a plot of land and the rain is falling on it. It then goes on to describe two possible outcomes for one plot of land (i.e. Christians). The one is that it produces a useful crop, because its owners have been cultivating it. The ground is able to receive the rain, i.e. the blessing of God (Heb 6:7). The other is that the same land produces thorns and thistles and becomes worthless and is near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned (8). It is implied that the owner isn't doing his diligence.

Some people seem to think that this "burning" refers to losing salvation and going to hell. But that isn't at all what the illustration is talking about. Instead, Why do you burn

land? To destroy the weeds and to make it fertile again. It does not destroy the land. Rather, it makes it better! Curiously, Paul uses a similar illustration of burning in the parallel “milk” passage of 1 Cor 3. There we see that some people’s works are “burned up” and the man will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, but only as through [purifying] fire (vs. 15).²¹ In other words, the illustration is not at all helpful to those who think this teaches people can lose their salvation. Rather, it describes two possible outcomes for Christians. You either press on to maturity through obedience or you willfully continue in disobedience.

But what about the “curse” here? Doesn’t this refer to losing salvation and going to hell? No. It does not say that the ground “is” cursed, but the it is “in danger of being” cursed. Big difference.

We are left with a couple more questions in the text. It says, of these people that it is impossible to “restore them again to repentance” and this is because of two things. First, what does restore them to repentance mean? Well, it can’t

²¹ Other parallels in the passage include milk (1 Cor 3:2; Heb 5:12), their poor behavior (1 Cor 3:3; Heb 5:14??), and illustration of planting in a field (1 Cor 3:6-7; Heb 6:7-8; the people as God’s building/temple (1 Cor 3:9, 16; Heb 3:6), “foundational” doctrines (1 Cor 3:11; Heb 6:1); and suffering loss (1 Cor 3:15; Heb 6:8).

be talking about people who never repented a first time (unbelievers), because this wouldn't be a "restoration".

But another question arises. **Impossible for whom?** Most just assume that it is impossible for the person himself to repent, because he has committed an unforgivable sin. But it doesn't actually tell us who it is impossible for. But if the forty year generation in the wilderness has anything to say about it then, **"Contextually, it is impossible to renew them because God himself won't permit it (v. 3)."**²²

Psalm 78 has the same OT context in mind. **Vv. 32-33** reads, **"In spite of all this, they still sinned; despite his wonders, they did not believe. So he made their days vanish like a breath, and their years in terror."** God wouldn't tolerate it. Like Nadab and Abihu or Korah and his family, or in the NT Ananias and Sapphira, or (curiously, given the context of Hebrews and "tasting") the people in **1 Corinthians 11:30** who ate the Lord's Supper in a mocking way. **They all died.** Did they lose their salvation? It never, ever says this. We don't know if they were saved or not. Some could have been! It simply says that they died. And

²² David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 363.

this had the desired effect for the OT people at least, “When he killed them, they sought him; they repented and sought God earnestly. They remembered that God was their rock, the Most High God their redeemer” (Ps 78:34-35). This is the advantage of going back to the OT which is in the Apostle’s mind in the first place. It can help us understand a difficult passage.

At just this point, we need to remember **Hebrews 6:3**, for it is the critical verse for interpreting this passage. “And this we will do if God permits.” We will press on to maturity if God permits. The 1 Cor 11 NT passage where they are dying from taking the Supper, comes in the context of the previous chapter where are many parallels with Hebrews. In **1 Cor 10**, Paul has **the same OT example in mind** in a warning to the Corinthians. The people “fell” (*pipto*; **1 Cor 10:8**) and so we should not “fall” (*pipto*; vs. **12**). There is baptism and the manna (**10:2-3**). There is the “**end of ages**” (**11**). And these things happened for our **instruction** (vs. 11); Hebrews is using the same stories for our instruction. But in 1 Cor 10, no one thinks that anyone is committing an unforgivable sin and thus losing salvation.

But what about those two statements at the end of them

not being renewed to repentance? One says that they “**crucify the Son of God to their own harm.**” The other says that they “**hold him up to contempt.**” Does this refer to apostasy? It seems to me that they are simply looking at the same kinds of things that Israel did, but from the perspective of the cross. It is very similar to the Israelites drinking from a spiritual Rock who is Christ (1Co 10:4), but then craving evil things (6), becoming idolaters (7), becoming immoral (8), grumbling (9), and “trying” “Christ”²³ (9). It is very similar to Moses striking the Rock, which is Christ.

Crucifying “**to their own harm**” is literally, “**to themselves.**” What would it mean to crucify the Son of God to yourself? It obviously isn’t literal. No one actually re-crucifies Jesus. Instead, we show ourselves to be internally contradictory in our confession and commitments to Christ as believers when we sin. We dishonor Jesus. We act like non-Christians. We mock the cross. It isn’t just one sin that does this, it is any sin. Hence, every time we sin it is “as if” Jesus is having to be re-crucified all over again. It is like we

²³ *Christon* (Christ) is the probable original, the variant being *kurios* (Lord, ESV). See Bruce Manning Metzger, United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament (4th Rev. Ed.)* (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 494.

are holding him up to public contempt.

So What is He Warning?

If all of this is true, then **what is actually the warning of Hebrews 6?** Remember again the immediate context. They are immature Christians and they seem to be halting in their desire to move on to maturity. They are acting horribly. They are not discerning good and evil. They are literally obsessed with certain basic doctrines in an unhealthy way. These people are not spiritually well. They are not mature. But they are Christians. Therefore, if the goal is maturity, then the warning here is staying in an immature state and not desiring to go further, and in this state you will lose many eternal rewards and probably not a few earthly things as well.

As we've seen, the whole exodus experience is given as an ongoing illustration of this. There came a point where God said "**enough is enough.**" In Heb 6:3 language, he would not permit them to go on. "I'm not going to tolerate your unfaithfulness any longer. Your idols, your adultery, your constant violations of my law, your lack of believing

my promises, your flagrant attacks on the Son of God,” on and on the sins go. These caused God to put an end to them. Some died in specific events. Most were not allowed to enter God’s rest. God wouldn’t let them. Their lives were a mockery of his holiness. No, the sin isn’t apostasy (at least not yet).

Beloved, Hebrews isn’t talking about losing salvation, but it is talking to Christians. The sin isn’t one that leads to the loss of salvation. It is sin that absolutely refuses to move on to maturity in Christ. “Falling away” could include just about any sin that the children of Israel committed. It is a falling away from everything they have experienced in the supernatural realm. It is a dulling of the ears, and closing of the eyes, a thoughtlessness towards neighbor, a lack of love, an intentional rebellion against the body of Christ that moves so far that God puts a stop to it once and for all.

Does this mean you can take a deep sigh of relief, because I’ve told you I don’t think this passage is about committing apostasy? **Yes and no.** Yes, because no true believer can commit the unpardonable sin. There is no passage anywhere that says such a thing. It just isn’t possible. If that were true, then God’s word would be lying in many

places. But no, because this warning is for you. Just remember Moses and Aaron and Miriam.

Christians introduce all kinds of horrors that they need not have, were they simply to simply believe Christ by faith and do what he says. Frankly, we bring these things upon ourselves by our own stupid sins. Is that what we really want? But even more, it seems to me that a complete lack of caring about growing into maturity as a Christian, and all that this entails even as we have seen today and in the previous passage could very well be a sign that you are not in fact saved, for obviously, falsely professing people also don't want to move on to maturity. You need to ask yourself if this is you. If it is, then repent, beloved. Look to Christ and desire to know him.

And look at how the warning finishes. “Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation” (Heb 6:9). “God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his Name in serving the saints, as you still do” (10). “We desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those

who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (11-12). Suddenly, because we are reading the text on its own terms, these words make complete sense of the warning. And I can't add anything better to it.

If such words as these do nothing to you, then I fear for your soul. But if they catch you by the hair on the back of your neck, make you sit up in a little pain, but then also spur you on towards maturity, then God is working. Look to Christ, the author and finisher of our faith. Look to him and not to yourself. Believe the things he tells you. Do what he tells you to do. Desire to move deeper into the Faith, into knowledge, into love, and into a relationship with the Lord. This is the sign that you are moving on to maturity. This and nothing less is our hope and our confidence. Take hold of these things, and you will never be put to shame.