



“BUT IF IT YIELDS THORNS AND THISTLES”:

AN EXPOSITION OF HEBREWS 5:11–6:12

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Chapter six of Hebrews, particularly vv 4-6, remains a classic interpretative challenge as well as a theological battleground concerning the issues of eternal security, perseverance, and assurance of salvation. Great evangelical stalwarts have parted company at this juncture. On the one hand, we find no less a scholar than I. Howard Marshall insisting that genuine Christians are being described but concluding that they may be “lost through deliberate apostasy.”¹ On the other hand, F. F. Bruce, equally an evangelical champion of the faith, contends (in the Reformed tradition) that the subjects in view were never Christians at all. Rather, Bruce argues, the author “is not questioning the perseverance of the saints; we might say that rather he is insisting that those who persevere are the true saints.”²

Begging to differ with both these positions are those of the “free grace” camp who see this passage addressed to true Christians who—though not in danger of losing their salvation—are nevertheless in danger of judgment from God and eventual loss of rewards. The following exposition of Heb 5:11–6:12, written from this latter perspective, not only best accounts for the details of the passage (I believe) but underscores the urgency for all Christians to grow in spiritual maturity.

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *Kept By the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (London: Epworth, 1969), 145.

² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 144.

I. HEBREWS SIX IN RELATION
TO THE AUTHOR'S ARGUMENT

Chapters 1–7 of Hebrews form the first major movement within the book. In these chapters, the author of Hebrews argues his case for the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old Covenant by virtue of the superior Person on which it has been founded, namely, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In 1:5–2:8, he demonstrated the superiority of Jesus to the angels, and explained why it was necessary for Jesus to temporarily be “a little lower than the angels.” This was a significant point, for angels were instruments of God used in bringing the revelation of the Old Covenant (2:2). Jesus’ superiority to them implies that the revelation of the New Covenant through Him is superior to the former revelation of God given in the Old Covenant—and hence ought to be carefully heeded (1:1-2; 2:1).

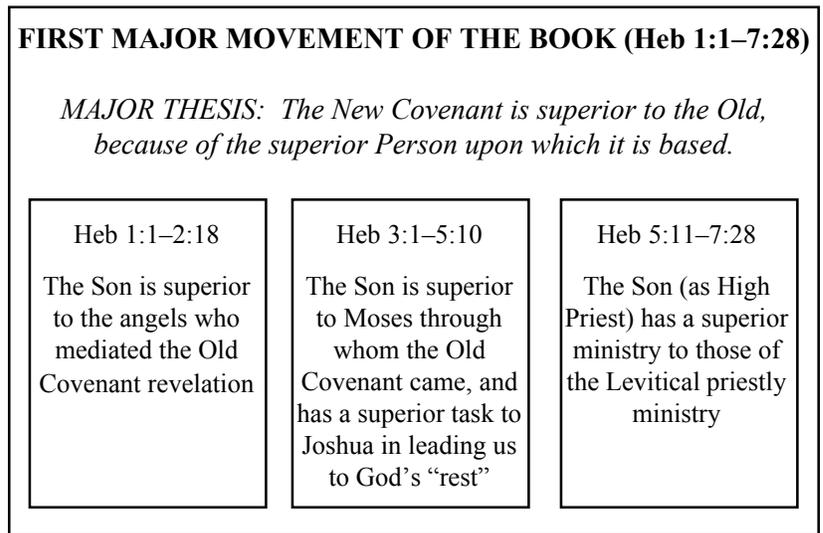
In 3:1–5:10, he pointed out the superiority of Jesus to Moses and suggested that Jesus is guiding His people to a greater “rest” than did Joshua under the Old Covenant. This material likewise supports his case. Moses was the primary human agent by whom God brought the Old Covenant and by whom the earthly tabernacle was established. Though Joshua led the people of the Old Covenant to their “rest” in the land of Canaan and granted them an earthly inheritance, Jesus leads His people to a yet greater rest. This greater rest is not the mere land of Canaan, but the Messianic kingdom where faithful believers are to enjoy their eternal rest and inheritance.³ To be successful in this pilgrimage that results in an eternal *eschatological* salvation, however, New Covenant believers will need the help of a high priest (namely, Jesus).

³ The *kingdom theme* was introduced as early as chapter one, especially vv 8-9 where the Son’s kingdom is explicitly mentioned. This suggests that the Son’s appointment in 1:2 as “heir of all things” (an allusion to the Messianic promise of Ps 2:8 for God’s king designate) will find its fulfillment in this new world order. This, then, is “the world to come” that our author mentions in 2:5, and which he refers to directly in 12:28 as “a kingdom which cannot be shaken.”



The matter of Messiah being both king and priest was no doubt a more difficult matter to comprehend for those steeped in Old Covenant thought. In 5:5-6, however, the author demonstrated that the Old Covenant revelation anticipated that the Messiah would not only be a king but also a high priest (so Psalm 110). Hence, there is a legitimate basis for Jesus to be regarded as a high priest.

Beginning in 5:11, then, he initiates a third case for the superiority of the New Covenant by arguing for the superiority of Christ’s priestly ministry to that of the Levitical priestly ministry. The author senses, however, that this will be a much more difficult task, given the spiritual condition of his readers. They will need to be able to comprehend deeper spiritual truth, if they are to bear with him. They will need to be able to understand the Melchizedekan priesthood and its relationship to the Old Covenant priesthood based on Aaron and the tribe of Levi. The following diagram clarifies the author’s flow of thought in chapters 1–7:



Though the main force of this argument regarding the comparison of priesthoods will be given in 7:1-28, the preceding material in 5:11–6:20 is meant to help prepare them for this presentation. The author must first address their immaturity and declining spiritual state, which he views as quite a serious matter. Not only will their immaturity hinder them from comprehending the truth he wants to present; but continued

persistence in their condition could result in their “falling away” (6:6). That situation would not only invite God’s judgment upon them (6:7-8), but would result in their forfeiture of the promises to be inherited.

II. THE STATEMENT OF THEIR SPIRITUAL PROBLEM (5:11-14)

This section presumes that there is a correlation between spiritual maturity and one’s ability to understand spiritual truth. As one progresses toward spiritual adulthood, he should grow in his ability to comprehend spiritual truth. Yet, in the spiritual realm, one’s ability to comprehend does not necessarily increase with the passing of time. How one has responded to truth along the way determines one’s present capability to understand and whether or not he ever gets past the spiritual ABC’s.

The proper response, of course, is one of faith and obedience... applying the Word to one’s life and thus becoming a “doer” of the Word... becoming more Christlike in character and being drawn into a deeper experience of worshiping God. Before God gives us more spiritual light, we must first respond to the light He has already given us! This is one of the fundamental principles of the Christian life.

A. THE READERS ARE “DULL OF HEARING” (5:11)

The problem with the readers of Hebrews, however, is that they had not responded properly to the spiritual light they had received. Consequently, they had failed to grow and develop—and thus remained in spiritual infancy. This makes explaining Christ’s priestly ministry difficult, for they are “dull” (*nōthroi*) of hearing. The word *nōthros* basically means *slow* or *sluggish*.⁴ They are *sluggish hearers*, meaning that they do not hear well when it comes to comprehending spiritual truth. Lane remarks,

⁴ We do have three occurrences of *nōthros* in the LXX (Pr 22:29; Sir 4:29; 11:12). The idea of “sluggish” is seen, for example, in Sir 4:29 (=Ecclesiasticus) where it is contrasted with the idea of “hasty:” “Be not hasty in thy tongue, and in thy deeds slack (*nōthros*) and remiss.”



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Deafness or dullness in receptivity is a dangerous condition for those who have been called to radical obedience. The importance of responsible listening has been stressed repeatedly in the sermon (2:1,...; 3:7b-8a, 15; 4:1-2, 7b).⁵

The adjective *nōthros* is important to our evaluation of this whole unit, since it occurs only one other time in the New Testament and that is in Heb 6:12. What we have, then, is an *inclusio* with *nōthros* marking the beginning and ending points of the subunit.

5:11 “you are *dull/sluggish* of hearing”

6:12 “that you might not be *sluggish (nōthroī)*, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises”

Within this *inclusio*, the author will confront them about their immaturity, exhort them to mature, warn them about failure to do so, and finally encourage them that he has high hopes for them—even that they might “inherit the promises.”

B. THE READERS CANNOT PARTAKE OF “SOLID FOOD” (5:12)

The problem was not that the readers had not had time to mature and progress to a point of greater spiritual understanding. In fact, had they made appropriate progress, they even could have (and should have!) been teachers by this time. With the comment “you have need again,” the word *again (palin)* was a reminder that someone had already indeed taught them the basics of Christianity, the “elementary principles of the oracles of God.” The word for *principles* (NASB) or *truths* (NIV) is the word *stoicheion* which means *fundamental principles* or what we might call the ABC’s. The term was used of the letters of the alphabet as they might be learned by a school child. The author likens these *basic truths* of the faith to “milk” in contrast to “solid food.”

Just as a baby has to drink milk until it develops to a point of being able to digest solid foods, so it is in the spiritual realm as well. Not all

⁵ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47A (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1991), 1:136.



truth is at the same level, and not all truth is digestible by all Christians. Only those who have worked their way through the “milk stage” are ready for deeper spiritual truth. Yet, the author is not going to correct their problem by trying to relay the foundational truths. Rather, he will issue a serious warning to them, and then seek to exhort and motivate them to obey.

C. SPIRITUAL MATURITY INVOLVES THE CAPACITY TO DISCRIMINATE, BUT ONE MUST BE TRAINED FOR THIS (5:13-14)

There is nothing wrong with *being an infant* (*nēpios*), but there is plenty wrong with *remaining* an infant. One should make progress beyond *spiritual infancy*. If one never feeds on anything other than the “milk” (the first basics), he will be *inexperienced* (*apeiros*) in the “word of righteousness.”⁶ The expression *word of righteousness* (*lougou dikaiosunēs*) has been variously interpreted.⁷ The NIV’s “teaching about righteousness” reflects their classification as an *objective genitive*,

⁶ The word *apeiros* is a *hapax* in the NT (only used once), although it is used four times in the LXX (Num 14:23; Wis 13:18; Zech 11:15; Jer 2:6). It is used in Num 14:23, for example, to speak of an “inexperienced youth” and in Zech 11:15 to speak of an “unskilled shepherd.” The word basically means to be inexperienced in something, and thus lacking the appropriate skill for such an endeavor. In Jer 2:6, it speaks of the wilderness as an “untried land,” i.e., no one had passed through it before.

⁷ Lane (1:138) interprets the phrase in a more restricted way as meaning the “paramount lesson in holiness” and connects it with endurance that has martyrdom in sight. He states,

“It may be preferable, therefore, to take account of a technical use of the formulation in the early second century that clearly links the phrase with martyrdom. In calling for unceasing perseverance in Christian hope, Polycarp appeals to Christ Jesus and says, ‘He endured everything. Therefore, let us become imitators of his patient endurance and glorify him whenever we suffer for the sake of his name. I, therefore, exhort you *to obey the word of righteousness* (*peitharchein tō logō tēs dikaiosunēs*) and practice patient endurance to the limit—an endurance of which you have had an object lesson not only in those blessed persons Ignatius, Zosimus, and Rufus, but also in members of your own community as well as in Paul himself and the other apostles’ (*Phil.* 8, 1B9.1). J. A. Kleist comments on the expression *tō logō tēs*



though Ellingworth prefers a *genitive of quality*, meaning “righteous Word.”⁸ Consideration could also be given to a *genitive of purpose*, in which the phrase could be translated “the Word for righteousness.” In this case, the author would have in mind the intended outcome that growing in the Word should provide. Such an understanding would have a natural connection with chapter twelve, where “training” that comes by way of God’s discipline enables believers to share in God’s holiness and righteousness [note especially Heb 12:11 in which *dikaïosunē* is used again with *gumnazō*].

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Whether an objective genitive is preferred or genitive of purpose, the author’s point is that “spiritual infants” are untrained and inexperienced in this facet of the Christian life. Such righteousness does not come easily, but only as one moves beyond spiritual infancy (the “milk” stage) and begins to walk by faith and endures through the God-given *training sessions* designed to produce righteousness and holiness in one’s life. Retreating in the Christian life will certainly not help one attain these goals.

The solid food of God’s Word, however, is for those who are mature. In the case of the mature, their *senses (aisthētēria)* have been

dikaïosunēs: ‘Polycarp now shows that the great and paramount lesson in holiness which a Christian has received is to hold himself in readiness for martyrdom’ (ACW 1:193, n. 65).”

Although Lane’s interpretation would fit in with the larger concerns of the epistle, it is too dependent on a 2nd century use and not clearly attested in the immediate context.

⁸ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 307. In support of the NIV, note the use of *logos* in Heb 6:1 which follows: “The elementary *logos* (teaching) about the Messiah.”

trained for distinguishing between good and evil.⁹ One who would desire the “solid food” of God’s Word must realize that he cannot gain it apart from the process of maturing . . . a process that will require difficult training. The idea of stressful “training” is suggested by the word *gumnazō* (from which we get our English word gymnasium), meaning to exercise or train. But this maturing process is worth the price one pays, for in this way he comes to distinguish good and evil. This thought sets the stage for the author’s exhortation in 6:1 in which he urges them to move on to maturity.

III. THE CALL TO MATURITY (6:1-3)

A. THE READERS MUST CHOOSE THE GOAL OF MATURING (6:1a)

Having confronted the readers of their woeful state of immaturity—that they are *sluggish hearers* who lack the capability to comprehend “solid food”—the author calls upon them to press on to maturity. The word *Therefore (Dio)* initiating v 1 underscores the connection to the preceding paragraph and suggests that pressing on to maturity is the only logical inference to make. Lane notes,

In this context spiritual maturity implies receptivity and responsiveness to the received tradition (5:14), an earnest concern for the full realization of hope (6:11), unwavering faith and steadfast endurance (6:12).¹⁰

The very fact that the author exhorts them to “press on” clarifies that there is still hope and opportunity for them. But this is the decisive moment in which they must choose which way they are going to go [note that he is not suggesting a continued diet of “milk” for them]. Any appeals they may have received to leave the faith and abandon their confession of Jesus as Messiah (note 3:6, 14; 4:14) must be rejected in preference to the goal of maturing.

⁹ “Senses” means the inner part of man where moral reasoning takes place (4 Macc 2:22; cf. Jer 4:19).

¹⁰ Lane, 1:140.

B. THE REMEDY IS NOT TO BE FOUND IN LAYING AGAIN
THE FOUNDATIONAL TRUTHS (6:1b-2)

The author is not suggesting that the foundational truths they had learned about Messiah must now be discarded, as though they were unimportant. Rather, he is suggesting that these should not be re-laid. His readers must put their efforts into moving beyond these basic teachings that they already know.

There is debate as to whether the teachings mentioned in these verses pertain to Jewish or Christian matters of faith. Lane points out that the latter option has been questioned

on the ground that in none of the six items mentioned in 6:1-2 is there any reference to anything specifically Christian (e.g., Adams, *NTS* 13 [1966-67] 379-84; Weeks, *WTJ* 39 [1976] 74-76). Each of the articles, however, is related to the high priestly Christology developed in the subsequent chapters, which makes explicit the christological structure of the foundation.¹¹

The correct interpretation is probably not an either/or matter (i.e., that the teachings were either totally Jewish or totally Christian). Given the Jewish background of the readers, their faith in the Lord Jesus and participation in the New Covenant called for a radical reassessment of their previous understanding of spiritual matters. In other words, their Jewish worldview needed to be recast and given new understanding in light of the New Covenant Jesus Christ inaugurated.

The mention of “dead works” in v 1 does not pertain to human works of the flesh in general, but more specifically to the external regulations of the Levitical cultus. This is confirmed by the use of the phrase “dead works” in Heb 9:14, in which the accomplishment of Christ’s sacrifice is said to do so much more than Levitical sacrifices ever could. The “dead works,” then, represent the efforts connected with the earthly sanctuary system to secure cleansing and acceptance before God. Now that the Messiah had come and made a perfect sacrifice (one that did not merely provide *external cleansing* but even made possible the cleansing of the conscience), those Jewish believers who turned to Christ repented of (changed their mind about) the Levitical

¹¹ Ibid.

approach to God and adjusted their theology to place their faith completely in the Lord Jesus as the sure and final atonement for their sins.

Other teachings had to be adjusted in light of Messiah's coming as well. The four items remaining in v 2 are all grammatically related to the word *instruction* which in turn is related to *foundation* in v 1:

Not laying again a foundation

- (1) of repentance from dead works and faith toward God
- (2) of instruction about:

ritual washings
laying on of hands
resurrection of the dead
eternal judgment

The word *washings* (*baptismōn*) probably does not refer to Christian baptism but to Levitical washings connected with the cultus (note the use of *baptisma* in the plural in Heb 9:10). The "laying on" of hands was commonly practiced under the Old Covenant. This was associated with sacrifices (e.g., Lev 4:15 [by elders]; 8:14 [by priests]; and 16:21 [by the high priest on the Day of Atonement]). Also, hands were laid on the Levites when consecrating them to ministry (Num 8:10). Lane states,

The discrimination between useless washings on the one hand and purification by the blood of Christ on the other (9:9-10, 19; 10:22), or between priests appointed by the imposition of hands according to the law, which in its weakness could not achieve the perfection of the people of God, and the high priest appointed by the oath of God and the power of an indestructible life (5:1-6; 7:5, 15-28) demonstrates the relationship between the foundational teaching and the advanced instruction provided in 7:1-10:18.¹²

Whatever understanding they previously had about resurrection and eternal judgment now had to be corrected in light of Messiah's coming. There was certainly a resurrection: since He had been resurrected, so they would be also. Furthermore, the Father had entrusted

¹² Lane, 1:140.



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all judgment into His hands (John 5:22). For believers, they must be prepared for giving an account at the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10), while unbelievers will face condemnation to hell at the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev 20:11).

Yet these foundational matters had already been dealt with in days past. There was no need to cover this ground again, but rather to “press on.”

C. THERE IS A DANGER THAT THE READERS MAY NOT BE ABLE TO PRESS ON (6:3)

With the mention of the eschatological issue of “eternal judgment,” the author suddenly stops his enumeration of what he considers “elementary teaching.” The thought of judgment is a sober reminder of the potential danger his readers face. If their present situation is not corrected, they may be in store for a negative judgment experience. Furthermore, God Himself may not permit them to “press on to maturity.” The phrase *if God permits* in 6:3 raises a note of alarm. While there is still the possibility of “pressing on,” they must be made aware that they are dangerously close to complete spiritual disaster. Hence, in 6:4-6 the author will now confront them with the situation whereby God might *cut off* the opportunity, thus leaving them to face the severe judgment of God.

IV. THE DANGER OF “FALLING AWAY” (6:4-8)

The compounding problem of their immaturity and “dullness of hearing” (5:11) could be alleviated if the readers were to “press on to maturity” (6:1). Though they desperately need to go on to maturity, the author sets forth the reality that *in some cases* that may not be possible. Hence, in 6:4-6 he describes a situation in which true regenerate Christians may commit an offense so serious that God may not permit them to move on to maturity. This offense is described in 6:6 as “falling away.” There is nothing in the passage that explicitly states they will lose their salvation for this, anymore than the sin of the wilderness generation meant loss of salvation for them, and certainly the author still has this Old Covenant failure in mind that he had brought to their attention in chapter three. Continuing the analogy, however, they may face temporal judgment and loss of their inheritance (as was true for the wilderness generation according to Psalm 95).

As serious as such a sin may be, the author is not actually charging his readers as guilty of this, i.e., he is not saying that any of them had gone to this extent yet. Three observations confirm this: (1) he offers the possibility of “pressing on” in 6:1; (2) he makes a subtle shift from the first person in 6:1-3 to a less direct way by use of the third person in 6:4-6, and (3) he reaffirms his confidence in them in 6:9. Nevertheless, he recognizes that they are on a perilous path, and they need to quickly gain their senses and realize the seriousness of what is at stake. If they do not shake out of their spiritual lethargy, they may very well end up as one of those described in Heb 6:4-8.

A. THE SPIRITUAL STATE OF THE OFFENDERS (6:4-5)

Verses 4-6 must be seen as one complete unit of thought. In the Greek text, the emphatic word *impossible* (*Adunton*), is placed up front in v 4, while the complement *to restore again to repentance* does not come until v 6. In between, we have a series of five participles describing those who cannot be renewed to repentance. The first four are positive statements of their Christian experience, while the last (“have fallen away”) in v 6 is negative.

Significantly, all five participles are governed by the one definite article *tous* in v 4 which serves to unite them. As a result, these are not two different situations, but a single situation in which the one who “falls away” is the very one who had been enlightened, etc.

Lane is undoubtedly correct when he states, “Together, the clauses describe vividly the reality of the experience of personal salvation enjoyed by the Christians addressed.”¹³ This is true for at least three basic reasons: (1) the author had expressed statements of concern about his readers in earlier portions of the epistle (e.g., Heb 3:12) while yet referring to them as “brethren;” (2) what he has to say about them in 6:4-6 cannot be divorced from what he has said about them at the beginning of this literary unit in 5:11-14, namely, that they are spiritual babes who have not matured; and (3) the terminology in 6:4-5 is most naturally descriptive of Christian experience, not of unbelievers.

To claim that they have merely professed to believe (in response to pre-salvation enlightenment) while yet remaining unregenerate is to force one’s theology on the text rather than allowing the text to speak

¹³ Lane, 1:141.

for itself. Randall Gleason is right on target when he points out that this passage must be understood in light of its Old Testament background.¹⁴ In particular, the author is still making allusions to the event that occurred at Kadesh-barnea:

Most important to this study is the writer’s use in chapters 3–4 of the Exodus generation at Kadesh-barnea (Ps 95:7b-11) as a type of the Christian community to which he was writing. In each case the Old Testament record of God’s dealings in earlier redemptive history is used to bring understanding to the present situation of his readers.¹⁵

Gleason substantiates this claim by pointing out numerous instances to the author’s use of the pilgrimage motif following chapter six.¹⁶ The fateful decision of the wilderness generation at Kadesh-barnea is the Old Testament counterpart to a decision by those under the New Covenant who would rebel and “fall away” from God.

The author’s first statement about his readers in this verse is that they had been “enlightened” (*phōtisthentas*). The author uses this term one other time in Heb 10:32 where he says, “after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings.” The context deals with their sufferings for the faith, a situation which would surely point to their regenerate state, for it is hardly imaginable that they (especially being first century Jews) would suffer persecution had they not truly come to know the Savior.

Secondly, he points out that they had “tasted” (*geusamenous*) the heavenly gift. Some have tried to argue that they had only “tasted” but had not fully partaken of, and hence were only *professing Christians*. The Greek verb *geuomai*, however, does not restrict itself to such a

¹⁴ Randall C. Gleason, “The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (Jan-Mar 1998). According to Gleason, the Old Testament is cited at least 38 times in Hebrews, and Longenecker has identified at least 55 additional allusions to the OT (Richard Longenecker, “Hebrews and the Old Testament,” in *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975], 166-70).

¹⁵ Gleason, 66.

¹⁶ See especially pp. 72-75 in Gleason.



limited meaning. Furthermore, the author has already used the same verb in Heb 2:9 in reference to Christ having “tasted death for everyone.” We would have quite a theological dilemma on our hands if Christ merely tasted death for us but did not fully undergo it. The Scripture is quite clear, however, that He fully experienced death for our sins.

As Ellingworth has noted, the author is using the word to mean “eat,” not merely taste, and hence figuratively to “experience (to the full).”¹⁷ Possibly, by the phrase *tasted the heavenly gift*, the author has in mind that they had partaken of God’s free gift of eternal life in Christ (cf. John 4:10; Rom 6:23). As the wilderness generation ate of the heavenly provision of manna, so these New Covenant believers had eaten the greater heavenly manna—the “bread of life” (John 6:33).

Thirdly, he states that his readers had been made “partakers of” or “partners with” the Holy Spirit. The word *partakers/participants* is the Greek word *metochous*, a word that was used earlier in 3:1 of the “holy brethren” who were participants in a heavenly calling and in 3:14 of those who had become partners with Christ by holding fast their confidence.¹⁸ In Heb 6:4, the readers are “partakers of the Holy Spirit,” because they had received the Holy Spirit when they believed. The Holy Spirit was God’s “pledge” (or earnest payment) until the day of redemption when they would receive their resurrected bodies (Eph 1:13-14; Rom 8:23).

Fourthly, he says in 6:5 that they had “tasted (*geusamenous*) the good Word of God and the powers of the age to come.” The word *tasted* is the same Greek word as used in v 4, hence a true experiencing of. The Christian message had come to them accompanied by miraculous confirmations which they fully experienced (recall 2:3-4).

¹⁷ Ellingworth, 320.

¹⁸ The translation “shared in the Holy Spirit” given by the NIV (as though to suggest that the guilty ones had only participated in some of the Spirit’s ministry rather than having received the Holy Spirit Himself) is too weak in light of the use of the term in Heb 3:1 and would better be rendered “partakers of the Holy Spirit.”

B. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF A RENEWED REPENTANCE (6:6)

The final participle of the series indicates that it is possible that one who had truly been enlightened and tasted of the heavenly gift (i.e., a truly regenerate person) can “fall away” (*parapesontas*—from the verb *parapiptō*). Our understanding of this crucial term is handicapped by the fact that this is the only time this word is used in the New Testament. Nevertheless, we are not completely empty-handed, for the verb is used eight times in the LXX.¹⁹ It is used to translate several different Hebrew words (most often *mā'al*). Frequently, *parapiptō* has the meaning of “transgressing” against the LORD, though not in the sense of apostasy. In Ezek 20:27, for instance, the LXX reads “your fathers provoked me in their trespasses in which they transgressed (*parepeson*) against Me.” In the preceding context, the main issues to their “transgressing” were the profaning of the Sabbath and turning to idolatry. From Moulton and Milligan, we find a few other examples from after the first century AD, including the following phrase: “if the terms of it (i.e., a contract) should be broken or it in any other way be rendered invalid.”²⁰

A better clue of the author’s intention, however, may be found in his use of the cognate form *piptō* (*fall*) earlier in the book. In Heb 4:11, he had warned the readers, “Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone *fall* (*pesē*—aorist subjunctive of *piptō*) through *following* the same example of disobedience” (cf. 3:17). In our author’s thinking, one could “fall” rather than being diligent to enter God’s rest. There is also a strong connection to his warning of “falling away from the living God” in Heb 3:12. In the case of Heb 3:12, the verb is *aphistēmi* rather than *parapiptō*, but the two verbs are still related. As mentioned above, most of the instances of *parapiptō* in the LXX translate the Hebrew verb *mā'al*, but the same Hebrew word is rendered by *aphistēmi* in another verse (namely, 2 Chron 26:18). Though the expression “falling away” in Heb 3:12 is not *lexically* related to our

¹⁹ For *parapiptō* in the LXX, see Est 6:10; Ezek 14:13; 15:8; 18:24; 20:27; 22:4; Wisdom of Solomon 6:9; 12:2.

²⁰ *Oxyrhynchus Papyri I*, 9534 (AD 129), ed. B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, 1898; quoted in James H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1930), 488-89.

verb *parapiptō*, *conceptually* it is. Lane concurs that it is “equivalent to the expression *apostēnai apo Theou zōntos*...in 3:12.”²¹

We can thus conclude that “falling away” in Heb 6:6 is to transgress against the Lord in a way that parallels what happened at Kadesh-barnea when the Hebrews rebelled against the Lord with a heart of unbelief, the end result of becoming hardened in heart against the Lord. More specifically, this would mean (in the context of what the author has stated thus far in the epistle) to not hold fast one’s confession of faith in Christ...the very thing he had exhorted them to do in Heb 4:14 (cf. 3:6). This is a major concern of the author, for he reasserts this in Heb 10:23.

Of course, any drastic falling away from the faith was unlikely to happen without some prior development. They must be equally concerned about the root cause. Already, there was a passive drifting away from the word of Christ (2:1), they were *sluggish hearers* who had not moved on to maturity (5:11-14), and some were already avoiding Christian fellowship (10:25). Such a situation, if not soon corrected, would only bring on more hardening of heart until (like the Hebrews that fell in the wilderness) it would be too late. That is to say, God’s judgment would fall...it would not be averted.

The author is telling them that there is a point beyond which it is impossible to restore them to a state of repentance. This would presume that their hearts would be gravely hardened. At this point (and only God knows when one has reached such a point), the guilty one does not recover to a repentant state, for this would be tantamount to recrucifying the Savior and a severe public humiliation of Him. Instead, the guilty one remains hardened against God and must face God’s judgment. However, we must be careful what we conclude as to the form this judgment will take (and when it will take place).

C. AN ILLUSTRATION OF TWO MAIN ALTERNATIVES (6:7-8)

1. Orientation. The author realizes that his audience could gravitate in one of two directions: they could either move on to maturity (6:1), or they could continue on the slippery slope that could ultimately lead them to “falling away” (6:6). Though in reality different ones among them were at different points of this spectrum, the author is primarily

²¹ Lane, 1:142.



“But if It Yields Thorns and Thistles”

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concerned with the direction they are headed. One leads to God’s blessing, while the other may result in disaster. To help them see his concern, the author uses an illustration from agriculture involving the response of the ground to care that it receives.

To understand the illustration, we should carefully note two important observations: (1) it is not “two grounds” being described but two possible outcomes of the same ground, and (2) regardless of the outcome, the ground has received the rain and what it needs for growth. Regarding the first point, we should notice that the NIV has obscured this matter:

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

In the Greek text, the word *ground* (*gē*) occurs only once (namely, in v 7...not twice as the NIV implies). So the point is that the *same ground* can have two possible outcomes, and by analogy there can be two possible outcomes for any individual’s life.

The falling of the rain upon the ground probably speaks of God’s divine care and provision for the ground, i.e., God gives what is needed for growth. In this illustration, the ground should never be devoid of vegetation, because it is watered and sustained. This is what God does for the life of each believer. He waters and cares for him so that there will be fruitfulness. If fruitfulness does not result, it is not because God has not given His care and done His part.

2. *Possible Interpretative Options.* The illustration of vv 7-8 could be interpreted in one of three ways:

- 1) A contrast between a true believer and an unbeliever
- 2) A contrast between a faithful enduring Christian and an “apostate Christian” who loses his salvation
- 3) A contrast between a faithful believer who is fruitful and an unfaithful believer [but not involving loss of salvation]

The decision about which interpretation to choose should not be based upon one’s preconceived theology *as primary resort*, but first

and foremost upon the exegetical details of 6:7-8 and the general context.

In regard to context, nothing explicitly has been said about loss of salvation, and the details of 6:4-6 do not seem directed at unbelievers (not withstanding the fact that several commentators have opted for this suggestion). Context is more in favor of option three above, especially since mature and immature believers have been in view since 5:11.

3. *Exegetical Details of Heb 6:7-8.* Most of the concern is with v 8, so attention will primarily be given to this.

a. An allusion to Gen 3:17-18. The author of Hebrews is not simply making an illustration, but seems to word his illustration in such a way as to allude to Gen 3:17-18.

Hebrews 6:8 – *ekpherousa de akanthas kai tribolous adokimos kai kataras engus*

NASB	LXX
Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life.	<i>epikataratos hē gē en tois ergois sou en lupais phagē autēn pasas tas hēmerastēs zōēs sou</i>
Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you,	<i>akanthas kai tribolous anateleī soi</i>

Not only do we have the exact words for *thorns and thistles* (*akanthas kai tribolous*), but the noun *curse* (*kataras*) in Heb 6:8 has similarity to the adjective *Cursed* (*epikataratos*) in the LXX of Gen 3:17.²²

²² Note that Gal 3:10 closely links the adjective *epikataratos* with the noun *katara*.

In the context of Gen 3:17-18, the first man Adam received God’s *curse* for disobedience. This is reflected in the words “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground.” Hence, the allusion to Gen 3:17-18 (despite the fact that the order in Hebrews is inverted) brings to our mind the *temporal judgment* that fell on the first man’s disobedience.²³

b. Blessing-Curse motif. Given the Jewish nature of the audience, the words *blessing* and *curse* would no doubt have particular significance to them in light of their Old Testament orientation. These words were juxtaposed in Deuteronomy 28–30, in which *blessing* was promised for obedience and *curse* (i.e., discipline) was promised for disobedience. Notice the use of the same word *katara* in Deut 28:15, 45; 29:26; 30:1, 19. The word *curse* should not be taken as a technical term in Heb 6:8 for those who are unregenerate. From an Old Testament perspective, this designated God’s discipline on His own children who were disobedient.

c. “If it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless...” The Greek adjective for *worthless* (*adokimos*) is certainly not a technical term for unbelievers. According to the standard Greek lexicon, the word means “not standing the test” and [then] “unqualified, worthless.”²⁴ The particular nuance of the word, of course, depends on the context in which it is being used. In the LXX, *dokimazō* and its cognate terms were often used in relation to testing or examining metals (especially by fire) to determine the acceptability of their quality (e.g., Prov 8:10; 17:3; 25:4; Isa 1:22). If they did not meet the standard, they were considered unfit and hence disapproved. The apostle Paul could use the term in relation to himself, as he does in 1 Cor 9:27, “lest... I myself

²³ There may also be similarity to the *song of the vineyard* in Isaiah 5. In that passage, *akantha* is used 3 times (5:2, 4, 6). God’s discipline came upon it, because it did not produce good grapes.

²⁴ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. Revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 18.

should be disqualified.” In this case, his eternal salvation was not the concern. Possibly he thought about disqualification or disapproval.²⁵

David K. Lowery suggests that Paul was concerned that he might be disapproved by God and thus face the disciplinary action of God that could even cut short his life.

On the other hand, the preceding context (with its analogy of competition in the athletic games) might suggest that Paul was fearful of jeopardizing his eternal reward. Fee agrees that the athletic metaphor is still in view. He writes, “This has been the point of the metaphors from the beginning, that the Corinthians exercise self-control lest they fail to obtain the eschatological prize.”²⁶

The antonym to our term for *worthless* is *dokimos*, a word that emphasizes a *favorable evaluation*. In 2 Cor 10:18, for instance, it is used to indicate the approval of that Christian (but not every Christian!) who is commended by the Lord. Some Christians are “approved” and some are not (cf. 1 Cor 11:19). The Lord’s approval may stem from the way one handles the Word of God (2 Tim 2:15) or by the way one successfully endures divine trials in his life (Jas 1:12). Thus, the evaluation of the unfruitful ground of Heb 6:8 as being *adokimos* probably implies no more than the fact that the offender is considered unfit and has not gained God’s approval. He may be in store for God’s discipline and eventual loss of reward, but there is nothing from a study of *adokimos* or *dokimos* in the New Testament to establish that he loses his salvation.

d. “Whose end (is) for burning” (*ēs to telos eis kausin*). The “end” or outcome (*telos*) of the ground that yields thorns and thistles is burning. Is the author trying to suggest (by analogy) that the individuals that “fall away” (6:6) are destined for hell? If so, then those who are in danger are either (1) Christians who lose their salvation, or (2) professing Christians who in actuality were never regenerate.

²⁵ David K. Lowery, “1 Corinthians,” *Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985). Note that chapter 11 immediately launches into a discussion about God’s discipline upon Israelites of old.

²⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 440.



The Greek noun for *burning* (*kausin*) is used only once in the New Testament [cf. The mention of fire as a judgment in Heb 10:27], but it occurs seven times in the LXX. In Isa 4:4, it is used of God’s judgment and purging of the land (including Jerusalem) for the Millennium “by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning.” In Dan 7:11, it is used of the destruction of the Antichrist who is “given to the burning fire.” The latter is certainly *hell* (compare Rev 19:20), though the word itself does not have to mean this.

Basically, *fire* is often used in Scripture to speak of God’s judgment or sometimes of purifying something or someone. Though *fire* can be used to speak of the ultimate judgment of the unregenerate in hell, *fire* is also used to speak of God’s judgment in connection with regenerate Christians. The latter is clearly the case in 1 Cor 3:12-15 where Paul is concerned about the “works” of believers in regard to God’s church:

¹²Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is *to be* revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test **the quality of each man’s work.**

¹⁴If any man’s **work** which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. ¹⁵If any man’s **work** is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire.

In the case of this passage, fire is used for revealing the *quality* of the believer’s works. The purpose is for assessing whether or not these are *rewardable good works*, but the person’s eternal destiny is not the issue.

Hence, the motifs of *fire* and *burning* can speak of judgment in regard to the unregenerate (i.e., hades/hell) as well as evaluation of the regenerate (i.e., examination of one’s works for the purpose of giving rewards). In the case of the latter, works that are unsuitable for reward are burned up.

So we must ask if in the case of Heb 6:8, the author is using *fire* to speak of the ultimate destiny of individuals in hell for their rejection of Christ, or if he is concerned about their *works* (i.e., a worthless life without rewardable good works). Two things in the following context argue for the latter: (1) he mentions their *work* in Heb 6:10, and (2) rewards are in view in Heb 6:12 when he speaks of those who *inherit the promises* because of their faith and patience.

Based on these two contextual observations as well as the other matters mentioned in points a–c above, the danger of *fire* does not seem to be related to hell. This probably looks at the discipline and judgment that can come upon an unfaithful Christian’s life who has not brought forth fruit (as he should) but rather a life of worthless works (thorns and thistles). Such a person stands in jeopardy of receiving the Lord’s discipline in this life (“near curse”) and will certainly see his works burned up when examined at the Judgment Seat of Christ (Rom 14:10-12; 1 Cor 3:10 ff.; cf. 2 Cor 5:9-10). In contrast, the believer that is moving onward to “maturity” and walking in obedience to the Lord can expect to receive God’s “blessing.”

V. ENCOURAGEMENT AND HOPE FOR THE READERS (6:9-12)

Despite the rebuke for being “dull of hearing” as spiritual babes and despite the ominous warning given in 6:4-6, the author has better hopes for his readers. It may be possible for these wayward believers to “fall away,” but the author apparently does not think they have gone to that extreme yet. So, his warning of the fatal consequences is balanced by an encouraging note and exhortation to faithfulness in vv 9-12.

A. AN AFFIRMATION OF HIS CONFIDENCE IN THE READERS (6:9)

In the previous illustration, the unsuitable vegetation was burned off the unfruitful ground. That should not be seen as the normative outcome of the Christian life, and the author is concerned of “better things” for them, i.e., things that “accompany salvation.” Most likely, *salvation* (*sōtēria*) is being used in the same eschatological sense that it previously had in the book (cf. 1:14; 2:3, 10; 5:9) and in which it will be used in regard to the Second Coming in 9:28. Earlier in the epistle, the author anticipated Christ becoming heir of all things (1:2) and of those who would “inherit salvation” (1:14). In chapter two, the author connects this concept of *inheriting salvation* with the regaining of God’s plan for man exercising dominion. This is the time when man shall be crowned with glory and honor...in resurrected state ruling jointly with Christ. This is the glorious destiny of believers who are faithful to



Christ in this life (cf. Rev 2:26-27). These are the “better things” that the author has in mind for his readers. Faithfulness does bring a rich reward, both now and in the eschatological future.

B. THE REASON FOR HIS CONFIDENCE IN THEM (6:10)

The conjunction *For* (*Gar*) in v 10 signals the reason (illative use of *gar*) for his confidence in his readers. Apparently, the author had firsthand knowledge of this group of believers, and he knew that they had been faithful to the Lord in days past. Notice that his commendation is not in regard to their personal justification, but in regard to their faithfulness *as Christians*. Their faithfulness is evidenced by their *work* (*ergou*) and their love. Later in the book (10:32ff.), he commends their past faithfulness again. Since they had begun their Christian pilgrimage well, they must not turn from the pathway of faithfulness.

C. THE EXHORTATION TO REMAIN FAITHFUL (6:11-12)

They are to be diligent to have the “full assurance of hope” until the end. The word *diligence* translates the Greek *spoudē*, the cognate to the verb *spoudazō* in Heb 4:11 (“Let us be diligent to enter that rest”). The word means “diligence, earnestness, or eagerness.” They are to be diligent and eagerly making every effort to maintain a “full assurance of hope” until the end. The author has in mind the same concern as in 3:6—“if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end” (cf. 3:14; 10:23). He is concerned that *each one of them* (*hekaston humōn*) maintain their confession of Jesus as Messiah and be diligent to remain faithful to Him.

Not only must they be careful to hold fast their confession, but the author does not even want them to be *sluggish* (*nōthroi*). This is the same word he used to describe them in 5:11 when he charged them as being “dull of hearing” (*nōthroi tais akoais*). Unfortunately, the NIV obscures the connection by its translation “we do not want you to become lazy.”²⁷ Indeed, they are *sluggish* at the present moment, but they must not remain so.

²⁷ The verb *ginomai* can mean either “be” or “become.” Note that the NASB chose the translation “be,” which is better in light of the use of *nōthros* in 5:11. The NIV’s “become lazy” suggests they had not already entered into this state.

Alternatively, they can be “imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” *Inheriting the promises* is not automatic for any Christian, for this is based on the exercise of faith and patience. The idea of “inheriting” is found four times in Hebrews, namely 1:4; 1:14; 6:12; and 12:17. In the context of Hebrews, the *inheritance* in view is the “eschatological salvation” and full participation in the kingdom of Jesus Christ, entering God’s rest and ruling jointly with Christ. Disobedience and unbelief may jeopardize these future promises (cf. Heb 3:12, 19; 4:1, 3, 11), but faith and patience help to bring them about.

VI. CONCLUSION

From the preceding study, we have observed that the inclusion involving the word *nōthros* in 5:11 and 6:12 marks the true parameters of the immediate context. This is important, since it identifies the readers addressed in 5:11-14 as being the same as those in 6:4-8. In both cases they are true Christians, and this is confirmed by the descriptive participles in 6:4-5. Their need is to press on to maturity, but a “falling away”—i.e., a rebellion against God akin to what happened at Kadesh-barnea (as suggested by the lexical connections between *parapiptō* in 6:6 and *aphistēmi* in 3:12)—could eliminate that possibility for them. This would not mean a loss of eternal life, however, and we do well to observe that such an outcome is never clearly specified. In Heb 6:7-8, the author’s deliberate allusion to Gen 3:17-18 underscores that divine discipline would be in store for such rebels. Yet he quickly turns in 6:9 to encourage them that such negative warnings need not be their fate at all. Through faith and endurance, they can “inherit the promises” (which in the context of Hebrews amounts to rewards that await them in the Messianic kingdom).

Hebrews 5:11–6:12 is a good reminder to each of us that we should be pressing on to spiritual maturity, but this is not an automatic or guaranteed outcome for any Christian. One attains to maturity as he responds in faith and obedience to God’s Word, surrenders his life to the Savior, and endures in the pathway of discipleship. The price, of course, is high (death to self), but the reward is great...and the reward is for all eternity!