

Hebrews 6 - Fallen Away (and similar terms)

There is a passage in Hebrews that causes legalists the most angst, and that is Hebrews 6:4-8. Frankly, it is one of the most difficult in the Bible but really should not be if you understand the context of the Epistle to the Hebrews. However, if you have the smallest legalistic bone in your body, you will want to use this passages to trash grace. And the way it is usually interpreted does just that.

Heb 6:4 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.

It has been proposed that this passage is:

1. A picture of believers who have been saved
2. But have “fallen away” and lost their salvation and will burn in hell
3. And cannot ever return to a saved status because of that.

If grace and works cannot be mixed without destroying the other (Ro 11:6), and there are passages in Scripture like Ephesians 2:8-9 that support the doctrine of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone, then the doctrine that suggests works can “keep” a believer must be viewed suspiciously as “faith+works”. That suggests the Hebrews 6 passage in question may have a meaning different from what some ascribe to it. I submit that it does.

The first law of interpretation is context. One must first consider the context of a passage under study. You can lift a passage out of context and make it say almost anything you want.

Long ago I was having a debate with a friend. He was arguing for vegetarianism as a superior lifestyle, and I confidently quoted Matthew 4:4 "...man shall not live by bread alone." After a moment of thinking, he conceded that I won. Of course the passage has zero to do with vegetarianism, but that didn't matter because he knew less about the Bible than I did, which wasn't much.

Let's begin by establishing some Scriptural context.

Heb 6:1 Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, ² and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³ And this we will do if God permits.

The context of this epistle is that it was written by a Hebrew believer to other Hebrew believers. Where that was is not revealed in the epistle—perhaps Jerusalem? Some think Paul was the author but probably not. Though some of the epistle sounds like Paul's writings, the author was more likely a disciple of his. Some suggest Barnabus, but we simply don't know. We do know, based on his knowledge of the Mosaic Covenant as expressed in the epistle, that he was a Law-keeping Jew before his conversion.

It was probably written in the mid sixties, some 30+ years after the Cross, and before the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. We know this because the epistle implies that the Levitical priesthood and the system of sacrifices were still in place, which would not have been the case if the Temple was gone (70 AD). And if the Temple had been destroyed, you would expect that fact to be mentioned somewhere in the epistle, but it is not. The entire epistle is written as if the Temple and Levitical system were still in place and active, thus a date of writing some time before the fall of Jerusalem.

The letter was written to address a problem being experienced by Jewish believers in Jesus the Messiah. The context is that they are some 30+ years after the Cross, and their Messiah (Jesus) has not returned as promised. Their non-believing, Law-practicing, Jewish friends, relatives,

and business associates in what was then and often still is generally a very tight knit community are pressuring them to return to Judaism. Because the Messiah they have been saying would return to set up the kingdom has not done so, He must not be the Messiah and what all these Messianic Jews believe about Jesus must be wrong. They are under pressure from fellow non-believing Jews that they need to come back to the Law and all the Levitical sacrifices associated with it through which they had, prior to the Cross, found temporary judicial forgiveness (“blamelessness” or “righteous under the Law” as Paul described it in Philippians 3:5-6).

Phil 3:5 ...circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; **as to righteousness under the law, blameless**

They have been getting tremendous pressure since they became followers of “The Way,” as it was called then, included being ostracized from the family, and other Jews would not do business with them. If you understand how tight this culture could and still can be, then you can probably grasp how extreme the pressure to reject Christ and return to Judaism must have been.

This epistle is essentially an apologetic, a defense of the faith, and the writer of Hebrews begins his defense in chapter one by establishing the deity and supremacy of Jesus as God. Chapter 2 is a warning against neglecting or abandoning their salvation, and they must put their trust (present tense) in the one whom they have trusted past tense) to deliver all that He promised, both in the promise of His return and sustaining their spiritual lives.

Heb 2:2 For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, ³ how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

There will be a penalty to be paid if they abandon the faith and return to the Law. They will forfeit any possibility of having a vitally alive spiritual life by returning to a works system to find righteousness.

In chapter 3 the writer begins by calling them “holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling” and continues by reminding them that Jesus was greater than Moses and Abraham, two figures who loom supreme in the minds of Jews. In 3:2 the readers are urged to fix their gaze on the person of Christ who is even now **faithful** to God.

Verse 3:12 says, “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to **fall away** from the living God.” This is a warning not to “fall away” (leave their faith) in Jesus as Messiah. Verses 4:14-16 reminds them that Jesus is their High Priest not some man in Jerusalem, and He was appointed by God and was the source of their salvation (past tense) (Heb 5:5-10).

Hebrews 5:11-14 warns them they have become “dull of hearing” (rejecting truth) and have not grown spiritually, thus they “need milk, not solid food” and “everyone who lives on milk is **unskilled** in the word of righteousness, since he is a child”. Rejecting the truth is a sign of spiritual immaturity. Verse 14 “But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.”

Heb 6:1 Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, ² and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³ And this we will do if God permits.

The writer charges it is time to move forward, not back (to Judaism), but on to spiritual maturity. The term “not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works” is describing what they did under the Law. They are urged to move forward and not back.

Heb 6:4 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,

The recipients of this epistle “have been enlightened” and “have tasted the Heavenly gift” and “have shared the Holy Spirit”. Some hold that the

passage is intended to describe those who are not true Christians because they have only “tasted” the heavenly gift, but the above passage description cannot be applied to anyone but a believer. The kind of exhortation appropriate to those who were “awakened and enlightened” but unsaved, would be *to encourage them to become converted*; not to warn them of the danger of *falling away*. The writer must be addressing believers with the epistle. The objective of the epistle was to preserve those who were already saved and in the Body of Christ.

Heb 6:5 And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come,

This is language, which cannot be applied to an impenitent sinner. He has no relish for the truth of God; sees no beauty in it; derives no comfort from it. It is only the true Christian who has pleasure in its contemplation, and who can be said to "taste" and enjoy it.

And the powers of the world to come was a phrase in common use among the Hebrews, to denote the future dispensation, the times of the Messiah – the Kingdom to them and Millennium to us. Again, this passage clearly supports the position that these are born again believers.

Heb 6:6 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

Some translations have “*if they shall fall away*”. Literally, this should be translated “*and having fallen away*” or as in the ESV here “*then have fallen away*”. There is no *if* in the Greek. It is not an affirmation that any *had* actually fallen away, or that, in fact, they would do it; but the statement is on the supposition that had they fallen away it would be impossible to renew them again. It is the same as supposing a case, which, in fact, might never occur, as if we should say, “Had a man fallen off a high cliff, it would be impossible to save him.”

The word rendered “fall away” means, properly, “to fall near by any one,” “to fall in with, or meet,” and thus to fall aside from, to swerve or deviate from. Here it means undoubtedly to **apostatize** from the true faith. It implies

a renunciation of Christian doctrines, or a going back to a state of Judaism, heathenism, or sin, in this case the Law. The writer does not say that any true Christian ever had fallen away. He makes a statement of what would occur on the supposition that such a thing should happen, thus the translator supplied “if” in some translations.

To renew them again. The ESV uses “restore”. The Greek *anakainizo* / an·ak·ahee·nid·zo/ means to renew or renovate, implying something existed in a deteriorated or damaged state and is brought to a like new or renovated state.

Since it says it would be impossible to bring them to repentance again, and since repentance means to have a change of mind about something, then this is a repentance (renovation) from what to what? Let’s let the context show us.

The reason this restoration to repentance is impossible is because “they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.” That is a reference to the sin offerings under the Levitical system. That system was designed to picture the future work of Christ on the Cross in the offerings. An animal that was perfect had to die in the Levitical system as a propitiation for the sins of the repentant offering Jew. BUT when this epistle was written, the Cross was some 30+ years in the past, and what the Levitical offerings had only pictured in looking forward to the efficacious work of Christ on the Cross was then a reality. For these Jews to return to that system before the Cross would be tantamount to them “crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt,” **in effect saying Jesus deserved to die because He was a fraud.**

Because of the Cross and Jesus being sacrificed as a sin offering that propitiated God’s anger, they cannot find forgiveness for their personal sins **through** the Levitical system because that inferior system had been replaced by one that was superior, the Cross. And that inferior high priest has been replaced by a superior one, a High Priest of the Order of Malchizedek (Heb 4:14-5:6). Since that “high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins” had been replaced by a greater high priest, Jesus

Christ, the forgiveness for sins was no longer available through that obsolete system. As a result it was impossible “to restore them again to repentance” under that old system, and I believe that should be viewed as “to a condition of repentance”.

They can't go back, because **back isn't there anymore!**

Heb 10:1 For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. ² Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? ³ But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. ⁴ For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. ⁵ Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; ⁶ in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.

Heb 10:11 And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins...

Why was it impossible “to restore them again to repentance”? Because no sins were forgiven by these sacrifices. The “blood of the bulls and goats” only “covered” the sins, “hid” them from God’s view for one year. And then the sacrifice had to be repeated. This was demanded under the Law until Christ came and dealt with sin once for all times. To return to these practices would be saying that Jesus was not the Messiah, and He deserved to die on the Cross just like those who called for His death that day.

Heb 10:26 For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. ²⁸ Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the

one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? ³⁰ For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” ³¹ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

To go back to the Law and the Levitical sacrifices and no longer finding “forgiveness” there would mean they would remain in their sins and face chastisement of a severe nature. “There no longer remains a sacrifice” through which the Jew can find judicial righteousness. **Back isn’t there anymore!**

Under the law to “set aside,” reject the Law of Moses, brought punishment. How much worse might it be for those who have “trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?” That is how much worse will it be if you reject all that Christ did on the cross for you after having “tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit” (Heb 6:4) and “tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come” (Heb 6:5)?

The writer is not arguing that one can lose his salvation if he should “fall from grace”. The writer is arguing that the grace that is being fallen from is NOT the free gift of salvation. It is the free gift of grace through the indwelling Holy Spirit (Gal 5:16) and seen as the Fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23) and finding daily functioning “righteousness” again through 1 John 1:9 when we do fail. The grace lost is present tense being delivered (saved) from the power of sin. These believers would be in perpetual sin because they would not be finding relief for that in the sin offerings of the obsolete Levitical system. The believer is under grace and not under the Law (Rom 6:14-15).

To state that a fall from a high cliff would cause certain death, would be one of the most certain means of preserving one from falling; to affirm that arsenic would be certainly fatal, is one of the most effectual means of preventing its being taken; to know that fire certainly destroys, is one of the most sure checks from the danger. To assert that one cannot find another means of deliverance from the power of sin, in this case in the Law, is to

urge a believer not to seek that non-solution. They are falling from the grace of a vitally alive spiritual life where they do find forgiveness for their sins in 1 John 1:9 into a system that can no longer provide even the pretense of judicial righteousness because any sin offerings under the Levitical system would now accomplish zero. They would have fallen from grace into perpetual sinning with no hope of finding even temporary forgiveness through a system that is no longer operative.

Heb 6:7 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.

Those who mistakenly assume Hebrews 6 is about a believer losing his salvation believe this supports it, and the reference to fire MUST imply the fires of Hell? It doesn't.

This is a horticulture metaphor used to clarify a doctrinal point, which would have been understood by the Jewish recipients of this epistle. Israel was (is) very fertile, but the land is often naturally covered with "thorns and thistles" and left untended thorns and thistles will once again take over. These must be burned away in order to prepare the land to be planted and fruitful. Such a land when it receives the rains "produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God". But if it produces "thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed". It must be burned in order for it to be fruitful.

I believe this passage is directly related to John 15.

John 15:1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not

abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

Drinking from the rain is taking nourishment from the vine, Christ, and produces fruit. But failing to take support from the vine, thus failing to produce fruit, results in a withered branch that is unproductive. The husbandman in Israel would prune the branch and burn it. It is a leap to say that implies hell just because fire images are invoked. It is a horticulture metaphor. The unproductive branch is cut off. To whom light is given much is expected (Lu 12:48). When expectations are not met the light (vine nourishment) is cut off. Use it or lose it. And note it is “men” not God who gather and burn the unproductive branches. But in the final judgment it is God, not man, who does the casting into the fires of hell. This passage is saying that “withered vines” become ensnared in the lifestyles of the fallen.

To revert to Judaism is to reject the Vine and the spiritual nourishment and all the support He can provide, which results in the lack of fruit production, a spiritual life that produces “thorns and thistles”. That believer faces discipline (burning) which is designed to correct his behavior/apostasy and get him to return to a productive spiritual lifestyle. If these Jewish believers attempt to go back to Judaism, not only will they not find judicial forgiveness for their sins under that system but neither will they be spiritually productive as all believers are called to be. And they will face chastisement (“burning their field” to make it productive again).

Hebrews is not about losing salvation by rejecting the truth once you have it. It is a warning to Hebrews directly (and Gentiles indirectly) not to get entangled in the Law again. Spiritual productivity cannot be found there. The whole epistle to the Galatians is about this same subject from the perspective of a Gentile being drawn into the legalism of the Law.

You can't go back, because **back isn't there anymore.**