



17: Saved And Lost?

The writer of the book of Hebrews is giving his readers another one of his warnings. He's told them, you're baby Christians: you need someone to teach you the basic principles all over again. But rather than teach them those basics again he's for pressing on. To him there's no point in going over the same things another time and now, in chapter 6 verses 4 – 6, he's going to tell us why that's the case.

“For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.”

Hebrews 6:4-6

This passage has a reputation of being difficult. It's often misunderstood and the misunderstanding has caused a lot of unnecessary misery and distress. If the passage is difficult, the difficulty isn't in understanding its language or grammar; that's plain enough. The difficulty's in deciding who or what class of people the writer had in mind when he penned it. There are a lot of different opinions on that but they all boil down to just three.

Saved People Can Be Lost

The saved and lost theory is that the writer has in mind Christians who abandon their faith. To go along with it you've got to accept that it's possible for people who have been genuinely born again to be lost. Taking the passage in isolation it is the most straight forward way to see it. The problem is that it contradicts the clear teaching of many other passages of Scripture. Passages like these:

“All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.”

John 6:37

“I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.”

John 10:28

- ◆ *What other passages can you think of that reassure believers of their eternal security?*

It is possible, without having to tinker with the meaning of the passage, to take the view that the people it's about have not necessarily been genuinely converted.

It's Hypothetical

The hypothetical theory agrees that the writer is referring to true believers, but it says he is merely putting up a hypothetical case in order to correct wrong ideas. In other words he's saying that if a true child of God could fall away it wouldn't be possible for him or her to come back to the Lord. It's hypothetical: there's nothing here that says it has ever actually happened or ever would happen.

But the warning of this passage has to be a real warning against a real danger, otherwise it's pointless to give it and that would be out of keeping with the whole tone of the book of Hebrews.

They Were Never Really Saved

According to the never really saved theory nothing is said here about anyone being born again. Those who hold this opinion say that the experiences mentioned in verses 4 and 5 all fall short of genuine conversion.

What Kind Of People?

So let's look more closely at what's said about the people these verses are about and their experience. There are six things said about them.

1. They "have once been enlightened." They have been instructed or taught and they have understood, at least in part, what they have been taught. Many an unbeliever has been granted some understanding of the gospel but never responded with true faith and repentance.
2. They "have tasted of the heavenly gift." They have had personal experience of the heavenly gift. What that gift is is unclear. It could be the hearing of the gospel or it might be the gift of the Holy Spirit or it could be some other heavenly gift: we are not told. But again, bear in mind that many experience stirrings of conscience and other good influences of the Holy Spirit without necessarily going on to be saved.
3. They "have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit." Even this needn't imply that they have been saved. For example, Balaam and Saul were endowed with miraculous prophetic gifts. We have no reason to doubt that Judas Iscariot, just as did the other Apostles, experienced the power of working miracles. Consider too these words spoken by Jesus:

"Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"

Matthew 7:22 – 23

4. They "have tasted the good word of God." They've experienced some of the benefits — the goodness — of hearing and obeying God's word.
5. They "have tasted the powers of the age to come." The age or the world to come would have been understood by the first readers of Hebrews to be the age of the Messiah. The powers of the age to come, could be the miraculous gifts of the Spirit that the prophets said would come in that age. Some say what's in mind is something broader than that. The powers of the age to come could be any or all of those things through which the Holy Spirit exercises a powerful influence these days: the Scriptures, personal testimony, godly lives, preaching, books and the like. So the writer is saying these people have seen God at work building His church and extending His kingdom.
6. They "then have fallen away." What is it that they have fallen away from? Surely that has to be the things that have just been listed: the enlightenment in the things of God and the stirrings of conscience, mind and heart that they have known; the spiritual gifts; the good benefits of obeying the word and the powerful influences of the Holy Spirit they have experienced. To fall away is to relinquish all that.

It is possible to experience all these things and yet not be saved. It is possible to experience all these things and then relinquish them and go back to a former way of life. And as far as those who do are concerned it is, according to verse 6, "impossible to renew them again to repentance."

- ◆ *How far do you think is possible for someone who is not saved to go in understanding God's word and experiencing the work and influence of the Holy Spirit?*

- ◆ *Can you back up your answer with some Bible references?*

Impossible?

Repentance, giving the word it's simplest meaning, is a change of mind or direction. To be renewed again to repentance then would be to be returned to the point where your mind was previously changed. The Jews to whom this Epistle was written had, at some point in the past, repented in the sense that they had changed their minds about Jesus. They'd come to recognise Him as the Messiah. The danger now was that they would reject Him and return to their old ways. The warning here is that if that should happen it would be not just difficult, it would be impossible to change their minds back in favour of Jesus again.

Impossible to whom? We can't say it would be impossible to God. Remember the context here: the writer is giving his reason for not going over the basics again. All he's saying is that when someone has understood the gospel; been stirred in conscience, mind and heart; experienced the work and influences of the Holy Spirit in a powerful way; tasted the benefits of obeying God's word and then rejected it all, explaining the basics again can do him no good. It would be impossible to restore someone who has once grasped those basics and then rejected them, by teaching them again.

Why Impossible?

The second part of verse 6 tells us why that would be impossible: "they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame." Those who turn back, by their actions, judge Jesus to be an impostor and worthy of death just like the Jews who originally crucified Him did. By their actions, if not their words, they diminish His reputation and expose Him to public shame.

That was the writer's reason for not teaching the basic principles of the faith again. That's why the right thing to do when you're dealing with people who haven't made progress in the faith like they should have and have become dull of hearing, is to press on with grown-up stuff.

- ◆ *To make sure you have understood this passage try, in your own words, to sum up the whole of this warning so far (5:11 – 6:6).*

Can You Be Saved And Lost?

As the original readers of this passage would have seen it, the main point here is that you must forget about notions of turning back and discipline your mind to press on to deeper truths. If you don't there's a very real danger that you'll fall into such a state that it will be impossible to recover from. At least, going over the basics again won't help it.

To try to learn more than that from these verses would be to press them beyond what the writer intended. Whether or not a true believer may be lost is not a question you should be asking of this passage. The writer isn't dealing with that question. That question is dealt with and answered very clearly in other places.

- ◆ *It's unlikely that you'll encounter someone who is being tempted to return to Judaism but you may well meet people who have professed to be followers of Jesus and who are being tempted to give up on Him. Often, when they come to that point, people raise doubts and questions that they're struggling with. Often those doubts and questions have to do with the basics of what we believe. Often they keep going back to those same doubts and questions trying to find answers, but they never do.*

What, in your experience, are some of the doubts and questions people commonly raise when they're being tempted to give up on Jesus?

What can you learn from this passage about how to help them?