

J Vernon McGee on Hebrews 6:4ff

This brings us to that passage which has caused as many difficulties as any in the Scriptures. Some consider it the most difficult passage to interpret.

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost,

And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come,

If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.

For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God:

But that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned.

But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak [Heb. 6:4–9].

Verse 9 is the key to the passage, but we need the context to understand what is being said.

As we study this section, we are immediately confronted with the amazing fact that generally commentators have avoided this chapter. Even such a man as Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, the prince of expositors, has completely bypassed it in his book on Hebrews. However, when we do come upon the interpretations available and summarize each, we can well understand why men have chosen to remain clear of this scene of confusion because we can get many interpretations.

In the interest of an honest search after the evident meaning of these verses, let us examine some of the interpretations.

The most unsatisfactory to me of all interpretations is that the Christians mentioned here are Christians who have lost

their salvation. That is, they were once saved but have lost their salvation. There are many folk who hold this position, and for the most part they are real born again Christians themselves. However, this belief makes them as uncomfortable as I am when I am making a trip by plane. I know that I am just as safe on that plane as anyone there, but I do not enjoy it as some of them do. There are many folk today who are not sure about their salvation and therefore are not enjoying it. Nevertheless they are saved if they have fixed their trust in Christ as their Savior. The essential thing is not the amount of faith they have but the One to whom it is directed. They turn to this passage of Scripture more than any other since they deny that we have a sure salvation which cannot be lost and that the believer is safe in Christ. I want to make it abundantly clear that I believe we have a sure salvation because Scripture is very emphatic on this point. Paul says in *Romans 8:1*: “There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus ...” and, my friend, he expands that great truth to the triumphant climax of such a bold statement as, “Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth” (*Rom. 8:33*). The throne of God is back of the weakest, humblest man who has come to trust Christ, and today there is not a created intelligence in God’s universe that can bring a charge against one of these who is justified through faith in His blood. Paul continues in *Romans 8:34–39*: “Who is he that condemneth? [1] It is Christ that died, [2] yea rather, that is risen again, [3] who is even at the right hand of God, [4] who also maketh intercession for us.” My friend, if you drink in those words you will have a great foundation of assurance. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.” Does that satisfy you? Well, let’s keep going. Paul is not through yet. “For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God,

which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Can you mention anything that Paul didn’t mention in this passage? Can you find anything that could separate you from the love of Christ? May I say to you, this list takes in the whole kit and caboodle. Here we have a guarantee that nothing can separate us from the love of God—nothing that is seen, nothing that is unseen, nothing that is natural, nothing that is supernatural can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. The Lord Jesus Christ also makes some tremendous statements about our absolute security. Listen to Him, trust in Him, and believe Him. The Word of God is living and powerful, my friend. Jesus said, *“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life” (John 10:27–28)*. What kind of life? Eternal life. If you can lose it, it is not eternal! *“And they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand” (John 10:28–29)*. It is not a question of your ability to hold on to Him; it is His ability to hold on to you. He says here with the infinite wisdom and full authority of the Godhead that He can hold us and that they who trust Him shall never perish. The question is: Is your hope fixed in God who is all-powerful, or in a god who may suffer defeat? I have cited only some of the passages of Scripture that make it abundantly clear that you and I cannot be lost after we have been born again into the family of God. We become children of God through faith in Christ. Once a person has become a child of God through faith in Christ he has eternal life. I cannot accept the interpretation that the people in Hebrews 6:4–9 were once saved and had lost their salvation.

There is a second interpretation that has some merit in it. There are those who contend **that this is a hypothetical case. “If they shall fall away.”** There is only a possibility that this might happen. The writer does not say that it happens, only that it might be possible. Those who contend that this is the correct interpretation say that it is the biggest “IF” in the Bible, and I would agree with them. If I did not take another position on the interpretation of this passage in Hebrews, I would accept this one.

The third interpretation points out that in verse 6 there really is no “if” in the Greek. It is a

participle and should be translated “having fallen away.” Therefore these folk have another interpretation, which is that the passage **speaks of mere professors, that they are not genuine believers.** They only profess to be Christians. Well, I cannot accept this view, although such scholars as Matthew Henry, F. W. Grant, and J. N. Darby hold this thinking, as does C. I. Scofield in his excellent reference Bible—a Bible which I feel every Christian should own, although in some cases I do not concur with the interpretations given in the notes, as in the instance before us.

I do not accept the view that these folk are professors rather than genuine believers. The Bible does speak of those who merely profess Christ. There are apostates in the church. For instance Peter in his second epistle wrote: *“It has happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire” (2 Pet. 2:22, ASV)*. Those folk were professors, not genuine believers. But in chapter 6 we find genuine believers, because they are identified as such in many ways. If you will move back into chapter 4 to get the entire passage, you will notice that it is said of these people that they are dull of hearing (see Heb. 5:11)—it does not say that they are dead in trespasses and sins (see Eph. 2:1). And in Hebrews 5:12 it says that *“when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you ... and are become such as have need of milk...”* They need to have milk because they are babes. An unsaved person doesn’t need milk; he needs life. He needs to be born again. He is dead in trespasses and sins. After he is born again, a little milk will help him. Therefore I believe the writer to the Hebrews is addressing baby Christians, and he is urging them to go on to maturity.

There are other expositors who take the position that since the ones spoken of here are Jewish believers of the first century, the warning can apply only to them. At the time Hebrews was written, the temple was still standing, and the writer is warning Jewish Christians about returning to the sacrificial system, because in so doing, they would be admitting that Jesus did not die for their sins. Therefore, those who hold this reasoning say that verses 4–6 apply only to the Jewish

Christians of that day and have no reference to anyone in our day.

There is still another group which stresses the word impossible in Hebrews 6:4. It is impossible to renew them—the thought being that it is **impossible for man, but it is not impossible with God**. They remind us that the Lord Jesus said that “... It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (Matt. 19:24). Of course it is impossible for any of us to enter heaven on our own; we must have a Savior, a Redeemer. Therefore, this again is an interpretation that I cannot accept.

You can see that there are many interpretations of this passage—and, of course, there are others which I have not mentioned.

Now there is one interpretation that has been a real blessing to my heart, and I trust you will follow me patiently, thoughtfully, and without bias as we look at it. Because I was dissatisfied with all the interpretations I had heard, I actually felt sad about it. Then several years ago I picked up a copy of *Bibliotheca Sacra*, a publication of the Dallas Theological Seminary, and read an article on the sixth chapter of Hebrews written by Dr. J. B. Rowell, who was then pastor of the Central Baptist Church in Victoria, British Columbia. His interpretation was the best that I had heard. I give him full credit for it. This is not something that I thought of, although I have developed it to fit my own understanding, of course.

First of all, let me call to your attention that the writer is not discussing the question of salvation at all in this passage. **I believe he is describing saved people**—they have been enlightened, they have tasted of the heavenly gift, they have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and they have tasted the good Word of God and the powers of the world to come.

The whole tenor of the text reveals that he is speaking of rewards which are the result of salvation. In verse 6 he says, “If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance” — not to salvation, but to repentance. **Repentance is something that God has asked believers to do.** For example, read **the seven letters to the seven churches in Asia**, as recorded in Revelation 2 and 3. **He says to every one of the churches to repent. That is His message for believers.**

So the writer of **Hebrews is talking about the fruit of salvation, not about the root of salvation.** Notice verse 9 again: “But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation [he hasn’t been discussing salvation but the **things that accompany salvation**], though we thus speak.” He is speaking of the fruit of the Christian’s life and the reward that comes to him as the result. The whole tenor of this passage is that **he is warning them of the possibility of losing their reward.** There is danger, Paul said, of our entire works being burned up so that we will have nothing for which we could be rewarded. *“For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire”* (1 Cor. 3:11–15). **The work of every believer, my friend, is going to be tested by fire, and fire burns!** The work you are doing today for Christ is going to be tested by fire. For example, when all of those reports that some of us preachers have handed in about how many converts we have made are tried by fire, they will make a roaring fire—if our work has been done in the flesh rather than in the power of the Spirit. We will have nothing but wood, hay, and stubble that will all go up in smoke.

Someday every believer is going to stand before the judgment seat of Christ. I wish I could lay upon the heart of believers that it is not going to be a sweet little experience where the Lord Jesus is going to pat us on the back and say, “You nice little Sunday school boy, you didn’t miss a Sunday for ten years. You are so wonderful.” The Lord is going to go deeper than that. **He is going to test you and see if you really had any fruit in your life. Have you grown in grace and knowledge of Him? Have you been a witness for Him? Has your life counted for Him? Have you been a blessing to others?** My Christian friend, I am not sure that I am looking forward to the judgment seat of Christ, because He is going to take Vernon McGee apart there. I will

not be judged for salvation, but because I am saved, He is going to find out whether or not I am to receive a reward.

Now notice that he is illustrating the fruit of the Christian's life: *"For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God: but that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned"* (vv. 7–8). If the believer's life brings forth fruit, it receives blessing from God; if it brings forth thorns and briers, it is rejected.

When the apostle Paul wrote to Titus, a young preacher, he dealt with the matter of works: *"Not by works done in righteousness, which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy he saved us ..."* (Titus 3:5, ASV). From this, one might be inclined to think that Paul is not going to have much regard for good works, but move down in that same chapter to verse 8: *"... I desire that thou affirm confidently, to the end that they who have believed God may be careful to maintain good works...."* Good works do not enter into the matter of salvation, but when one becomes a child of God through faith in Christ, works assume supreme importance. My friend, if you are a Christian, it is important that you live the Christian life.

When I was a university student the psychologists were discussing a matter which they have moved away from now. It was: Which is more important, heredity or environment? Well, my psychology professor had a stimulating answer. He said that before you are born, heredity is more important, but after you are born, environment is the major consideration! Now let's carry that line of thought over to our present study. Before you are born again, works do not enter in, because you cannot bring them to God—He won't accept them. Scripture says that the righteousness of man is filthy rags in His sight (see Isa. 64:6). You don't expect God to accept a pile of dirty laundry, do you? He is accepting sinners, but He accepts us on the basis of the redemption that we have in Christ. When we receive Christ as Savior, we are born anew and become a child of God. When that happens, we are, as Peter put it, *"... an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that ye may show forth the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light"* (1 Pet. 2:9, ASV). Now after you have been saved, you are

to show forth by your good works before the world that you are redeemed to God. Therefore the Christian has something to show forth, and that is the thing which is to be judged. If he is going to continue as a baby and be nothing but a troublemaker, turning people from Christ instead of to Christ, there will certainly be no reward. In fact, there will be shame at His appearing.

"For as touching those who were once enlightened and tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the age to come, and then fell away, it is impossible to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame" (vv. 4–6, ASV). These verses bring us to the very center of this study.

"And then fell away"—fell away is an interesting word in the Greek. It is *parapito* and means simply "to stumble, to fall down." It would be impossible to give it the meaning of "apostatize." It is the same word used of our Lord when He went into the Garden of Gethsemane, fell on His face, and prayed. There are many examples in Scripture of men who "fell away." The apostle Peter fell, but he was not lost. The Lord Jesus said to him, *"I have prayed that your faith might not fail"* (see Luke 22:32). Peter suffered loss, but he was not lost. John Mark is another example. He failed so miserably on the first missionary journey that when his uncle Barnabas suggested that he go on the second journey, Paul turned him down. He as much as said, "Never. This boy has failed, and as far as I am concerned, I am through with him" (see Acts 15:37–39). Well, thank God, although he stumbled and fell, God was not through with him. Even the apostle Paul, before he died, acknowledged that he had made a misjudgment of John Mark. In his last epistle he wrote, *"... Take Mark and bring him with thee; for he is useful to me for ministering"* (2 Tim. 4:11). Now, neither Peter nor John Mark lost his salvation, but they certainly failed and they suffered loss for it.

Read again verse 1 and notice that the writer is talking to folk about repentance from dead works—not salvation, but repentance. You will recall that John the Baptist also preached this to the people: *"Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance ..."* (Luke 3:8). He was referring to that which is the evidence of repentance. Repentance in our day does not mean the

shedding of a few tears; it means turning right-about-face toward Jesus Christ, which means a change of direction in your life, in your way of living.

Many of the Jewish believers were returning to the temple sacrifice at that time, and the writer to the Hebrews was warning them of the danger of that. Before Christ came, every sacrifice was a picture of Him and pointed to His coming, but after Christ came and died on the Cross, that which God had commanded in the Old Testament actually became sin.

You see, those folk were at a strategic point in history. The day before the crucifixion of Jesus they had gone to the temple with sacrifices in obedience to God's command, but now it was wrong for them to do it. Why? Because Jesus had become that sacrifice—once and for all. Today if you were to offer a bloody sacrifice, you would be sacrificing afresh the Lord Jesus because you would be implying that when He died nineteen hundred years ago it was of no avail—that you still need a sacrifice to take care of your sin. It would mean that you would not have faith in His atonement, in His death, in His redemption. As someone has said, we either crucify or crown the Lord Jesus by our lives. Today we exhibit either a life of faith or a life by which we crucify Him afresh—especially when we feel that we have to get back under the Mosaic system and keep the Law in order to be saved. It is a serious matter to go back to a legal system.

Notice again verse 6 as the Authorized Version translates it: "... if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance." Actually the if is not in the text at all. It is "having fallen away," or "then fell away"—a genitive absolute. It is all right to use the "if," providing you use it as an argument rather than in the sense of a condition. Why would it be impossible to renew them again unto repentance? Remember we are talking about the fruit of salvation. It is a serious thing to have accepted Christ as Savior and then to live in sin, to nullify what you do by being a spiritual baby, never growing up, doing nothing in the world but building a big pile of wood, hay, and stubble. Paul said the same thing in different language in 1 Corinthians 3:11 which says, "*For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*" Your salvation is a foundation. You rest upon it, but you also build upon it. You can build with six different kinds of materials—wood, hay, stubble, gold, silver, and precious stones. What kind of building materials are you using today? Are you building up a lot of

wood, hay, and stubble? There is a lot of church work today that is nothing but that. We are great on organizations and committees, but do our lives really count for God? Are there going to be people in heaven who will be able to point to you and say, "I am here because of your life and testimony," or, "I am here because you gave me the Word of God." Oh, let's guard against building with wood, hay, or stubble!

By the way, there is a difference between a straw stack and a diamond ring. And you can lose a diamond ring in a haystack because the ring is so small. I am afraid that a great many folk are building a straw stack to make an impression. One pastor told me, "I'm killing myself. I have to turn in a better report this year than the report last year. We have to increase church membership and converts and giving to missions." Oh, if this pastor would only dig into the Scriptures and spend much time in God's presence. Then he would be teaching his people the Word and many would be turning to Christ and would be growing in their relationship with Him. Every man's works are going to be tested by fire. What will fire do to wood, hay, and stubble? Poof! It will go up in smoke. There will be nothing left. That is what the writer is saying.

In John 15 the Lord Jesus talks about the fact that He is the vine, the genuine vine, and we are the branches. We are to bear fruit. "*If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit ...*" (John 15:7-8). He wants us to bear much fruit. When there is a branch that won't bear fruit, what does He do? "*If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned*" (John 15:6). He will take it away; He will remove it from the place of fruit-bearing and that is what the Lord Jesus is saying.

I see God doing this very thing today. And as I look back over the years, I have seen many men work with wood, hay, or stubble. And I have seen others work with gold. I know a layman who was a very prominent Christian when I came to the Los Angeles area almost forty years ago. Then he became involved in a dishonest transaction. He has lost his testimony, and yet he was a very gifted and likable man. I still consider him my friend, but I wouldn't want to go into the presence of Christ as this man will have to go when his life is over.

Also I recall a minister who was very attractive—a little too attractive. He was unfaithful to his

wife, had an affair with another woman, and finally divorced his wife. And all the while he tried to keep on teaching! But his teaching didn't amount to anything—he was just putting up a whole lot of straw. He was not even baling hay; he was just making a big old haystack. Finally the match was put to it, I guess, because he certainly didn't leave anything down here. Oh, how careful we should be about our Christian lives. **And we cannot live the Christian life in our own strength. We need to recognize that Christ is the Vine. If we have any life, it has come from Him, and if there is any fruit in our lives, it comes from Him.** We are sort of connecting rods, as branches connect into the vine and then bear fruit. Christ said that, *“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me” (John 15:4).*

“If they shall fall away” or “having fallen away,” it is impossible to renew them to repentance. They can shed tears all they want to, but they have lost their testimony. For example, a preacher came and talked to me about his situation. He moved away from this area and attempted to establish a ministry. But he failed. He had had an affair with a woman, and he had lost his testimony. He was through. “It is impossible to renew them again unto repentance.” I don't question his salvation; he is a gifted man who could be mightily used by God but is not.

“Seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.” My friend, any time you as a born again child of God live like one of the Devil's children, you are crucifying the Son of God—because He came to give you a perfect redemption and to enable you by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to be filled with the Spirit and live for Him.

“For the land which hath drunk the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them for whose sake it is also tilled, receiveth blessing from God” (v. 7, ASV). The garden produce is a blessing to man—my, it is delicious! *“But if it beareth thorns and thistles, it is rejected and nigh unto a curse; whose end is to be burned” (v. 8, ASV).* “Rejected” is *adokimos*, the same word Paul used when writing to the Corinthian believers, *“But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway” (1 Cor. 9:27).* “Castaway” is the same word *adokimos*, meaning “not approved.” In effect, Paul is

saying, “When I come into His presence I don't want to be disapproved. I don't want the Lord Jesus to say to me, ‘You have failed. Your life should have been a testimony but it was not.’” Oh, my friend, you are going to hear that if you are not living for Him! I know we don't want to hear these things, but we need to face the facts. Now notice the key to this chapter: *“But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak” (v. 9).* The writer to the Hebrew believers is saying, “I am persuaded that you are going to live for God, that you are not going to remain babes in Christ but will grow up.”

McGee, J. V. (1991). *Thru the Bible commentary: The Epistles (Hebrews 1-7)* (electronic ed., Vol. 51, pp. 104–115). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.