

Well, we are going to look at a serious passage... which is good for us. It is so important that you see what I'm saying today in the bible. What I say doesn't matter at all, if it cannot be substantiated in the bible. This is God's word. But if what I say is true to the text, then hear with a readiness to respond. We need to hear all the word says. The uplifting, straight-up encouraging words. And the blood-earnest, sobering words. Well, this passage is the latter. The author is giving a prolonged diagnosis and warning about the deadly dangers of not growing; of remaining in a state of spiritual immaturity. So he pushes us to press on to maturity. Let's grow up! Well, the author doubles down in our passage today.

This text contains what might be the most terrifying warning in the bible. If you take the bible seriously, it is not hard to see why. It refers to the issue of apostasy. Someone who deserts Christ, falls away from faith, and is lost forever. We hear often in American Christian culture that nobody is too far gone - God is a God of second, third, fourth, a hundred chances. Well, this text says there is a spiritual condition which makes repentance and salvation impossible. This is something you almost never hear - even in church. Some people cross a point of no return. It is impossible. That's serious!

Now with such a weighty subject, would you believe me if I said this passage aims for your deepest, most satisfying, and eternal joy? It does. Not a happy-clappy joy, but a serious joy. There is a vast difference between the joy of riding your favorite roller coaster at Worlds of Fun and the joy of standing on top of Mount Elbert in Colorado. There is nothing wrong with the joy of riding a roller coaster. But it doesn't compare with the joy of standing on a 14,440 foot peak looking in every direction at glory. This is the kind of joy God wants to produce in us. And this text is given to help. In order for it to help, we need to do four things: 1) Give the appropriate weight to this warning, 2) give careful attention to who this warning is describing, 3) look at any symptoms or early signs of those who fall away, and 4) consider how we should respond...

Hear the Warning (verses 4-6). Let's read verses 4-6 once more:

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.

You hear the words, "it is impossible... to restore to repentance." Stunningly, it describes people who have had lots of spiritual experiences and blessings. The author mentions four. These people really had spiritual experiences... but then they fall away. They were once enlightened, which means to illumine or enlighten the mind. Which means they had some clear apprehension of the gospel. They also "tasted the heavenly gift and shared in the Holy Spirit." The heavenly gift is probably referring to the Holy Spirit. In other words, they experienced the activity of the Spirit and even shared in it in some way. They tasted of the the goodness of God's word. There was an enjoyment of God's word. And they tasted of the powers of the age to come -

probably referring to miraculous powers. Hebrews 2:4 says that when the gospel came to these people, God bore witness with signs and wonders. And yet with all these experiences, there is a falling away.

The reason given for why they are beyond repentance is that they are crucifying Jesus all over again and holding him up to public scorn. In other words, to experience all these stated blessings, and then to fall away and go back after the world, is to stand with those who crucified Jesus Christ after professing him. To share in these blessings and go back is to publicly shame Christ by saying the world tastes better than him. Listen to what John Piper says concerning this:

It is one thing for a stranger of the faith to resist Christ. But it is another thing for a person who has been in the church and has been enlightened and tasted of the heavenly gift and become a partaker of the Holy Spirit and tasted of the good word of God and the powers of the age to come — it's another thing for that person to say after all those blessings and all those experiences, "I think what the world offers is better than Christ." That is a re-crucifying of Jesus and a putting him to public shame worse than any outsider could, who never tasted the truth.

You have to see that the severity of the warning corresponds with the amount of light. We saw this earlier in Hebrews (Hebrews 2:1-4). Jesus also says that sin's punishment will be in proportion to light received in Matthew 11:20-24:

Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you."

So the warning is to those who have received such light - they have been around the activity of the Spirit, heard truth - even enjoyed it in some way... and then turned away and said, "No thank you." And the highway of Christian History is littered with the wreckage of those who seemed to be all in only to fall away and make shipwreck of their faith. Demas. To receive such light, experience such blessing, appear to be all in, and fall away can cross a line of no return.

It is not for us to decide who has, but one thing is for sure - this should put an urgency in us to be found in Christ - not playing games.

Who is this describing? Who are these people that cannot repent? 3 OPTIONS:

Is this describing a Christian who loses their salvation? Those who believe that a Christian can lose their salvation go to this text as proof. Or is it describing a hypothetical situation. God is issuing a warning about a situation that could never actually happen. Or is this describing someone who really did have spiritual experiences and was part of the visible church and may have even been a leader... who appeared to be a Christian, but never truly was?

Well, I think it is the last option. This is describing a man who really seemed to be saved, who fell away, showing that he never really was a Christian. I think our text gives us two clues that this is describing an “apparent”, but not true Christian who falls away. First, look at verses 7-8.

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.

This is comparing and contrasting a fruitful field and the barren field. And notice the word “FOR” at the beginning of verse 7 - this is our clue that what is about to be said is a reason for what came before. The picture we have here is not of a field that once produced a good crop and then lost it and became barren. It is two different kinds of fields - one fruitful and one barren. Rain fell on both. One produced a crop and one produced thorns and thistles. The point is if we sit in church and hear the word, in the presence of God’s Spirit, and God’s people and are shaped by it all in some way, and then turn our back on it, we are like a barren field that will come into judgment. The rain fell (the word, Spirit, miracles, etc), but produced no life - no salvation.

Second, look at verse 9. After holding out the possibility that some professing Christians might commit apostasy, he says, “*Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things--things that belong to salvation.*” In other words, the experiences described apparently were not things that belonged to salvation - literally “possessed by” salvation.

Hebrews 3:14 I believe fully accords with this and shows us that a true Christian does persevere to the end. Here’s what it says, “*For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.*” Notice the tense of the verb “we share in Christ”. Not we will share in Christ if we hold out to the end. But we share in him now. We truly do share in Christ now if we persevere to the end in faith. And if we don’t persevere to the end, we do not truly share in him now. Perseverance in faith to the end is proof that we do currently share in Christ.

So this passage is not describing someone who has been brought from death to life in Christ, justified fully through the blood of Jesus, indwelt by the Spirit of resurrection, adopted into the Father’s family, and then loses all of it. No. It is, however, describing someone who may outwardly look like a Christian, talk like a

Christian, attend worship services on a weekly basis, but had saving faith that produces the fruitful crop, that brings with it all the possessions of salvation. And therefore, eventually they turn away from Christ.

Do we see any symptoms here of those who fall away?

Others could be pointed out, but I just want to point out one because I think it is the main concern of the Holy Spirit in this passage: A lack of spiritual zeal (diligence, striving, effort) and a tendency toward spiritual laziness. The two phrases “dull of hearing” (5:11) and “sluggish” (verse 12) describe this deadly symptom. Dull of hearing God’s word. Sluggish in faith and works. A spiritual indifference. A numb heart to the things of God. You guys, this is deadly! Which then leads to how we ought to respond.

How should we respond? (verses 9-12)

One way you should NOT respond is like, “Whew, I am so glad I’m saved and never have to worry about falling away!” After describing what happened to the Israelites who fell in the desert because of their idolatry and rebellion against God, Paul says, *“Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.”* (1 Corinthians 10:12)

To respond rightly starts with understanding that this warning is not just for someone, somewhere. It is for us. The appropriate response is to pursue what is called **“the full assurance of hope”**, or to **strive to make your hope sure**. Look at verses 9-12 (READ). I love the pastoral care of the author - (vs. 9-10) he sees evidence of their salvation. Works... serving the saints in love. And then verse 11 says, “We desire each one of you (all the rest of you) to show the SAME earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end.”

And we see what this full assurance results in (verse 11 - “so that”). NOT sluggishness, but imitation our forebears who had faith and endurance and inherited the promises. So does your actual life give evidence of a confident hope in Christ - evidences of love for the saints, good works, imitation of godly men and women. Or is there the potentially deadly symptom of spiritual laziness and apathy? If it is the former, keep going. If it is the latter, with godly fear, fight against the laziness.

The point of this passage is not to lead you to despair. But rather a call to action! The action of shaking off every bit of sluggishness, spiritual apathy, laziness, and be serious about making your hope sure - full assurance of hope. Serious about whether Christ is your hope, your highest Treasure. If your hope is truly anchored in Christ, he will never let you go AND he will indeed be your richest, deepest, and lasting joy.

Psalm 16:11 says, *“In your presence, there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”*