
The Warning Passages in Hebrews
Part 3 (of 5 parts):

The Thorn-Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4-12

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The third warning in the Book of Hebrews is in 5:11-6:12—a passage infamous for its interpretive problems. The various theological perspectives on this portion of God's Word are as numerous as any in the New Testament.

The eschatological section of the passage is found in 6:7-8 in the illustration of the soil, rain, fruit, and thorns. Even a casual reading of the passage reveals that a judgment is in view. It is the thesis of this article that the judgment is of true believers, in which disobedience may result in divine discipline in this life and in loss of future rewards in the millennium. The passage motivates Christians to live according to Scripture and to experience life to the fullest in the present and in the coming kingdom.

The Relationship of Hebrews 5:11-6:3 to 6:4-12

Hebrews 5:1-10 discusses Christ's qualifications to be a high priest, since His priesthood comes not from the Aaronic line but from the order of Melchizedek. Following a brief introduction concerning Melchizedek, the author shifted his discussion to the warning of 5:11-6:12.¹ The readers' spiritual dullness and immaturity might

¹ The inclusio form of the warning is clearly seen in the discussion of Melchizedek.

cause them to misapprehend the truth about Melchizedek.²

Hebrews 5:11-14 rebukes the spiritual immaturity of the readers and their failure to apply the principles of the Word of God to discern good and evil. The readers obviously had been exposed to the teaching of doctrine for an extended period of time (*διὰ τοῦ χρόνου*, "because of the time," v. 12), yet they had failed to mature in their faith.³ They should have matured to the point of being teachers but instead they needed *τὰ στοιχεῖα τῆς ἀρχῆς* ("the elementary principles"). These principles were the ABCs of the revelation that had come through Christ (1:1),⁴ which would include His teachings on the coming kingdom (2:3).

Hebrews 6:1-3 exhorts the readers to move from spiritual ABCs to maturity. The author did not review the basics, but he encouraged his readers to "press on" to *τελειότης* ("maturity," v. 1). The readers are admonished not to "lay again a foundation" or basis for their faith. The writer listed six objective genitives grouped in three pairs:⁵ repentance from dead works and faith toward God (6:1), instruction about washings and laying on of hands (6:2a), and resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment (6:2b).

Maturity and growth in faith involves human responsibility and God's sovereignty. "This we shall do, if God permits" (6:3). In other words spiritual maturity depends on the believers' obedience and God's working in their lives. Pressing forward is a present possibility if God permits. However, if the readers "fall away" renewal to repentance is not possible (6:6).

The Warning of Hebrews 6:4-12: The Thorn-Infested Ground

HEBREWS 6:4-6

The causal conjunction *γάρ* ("for") in 6:4 connects the previous section on moving toward maturity with the following warning about

See George Wesley Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1972), p. 116.

² Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), p. 189.

³ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), p. 132.

⁴ Zane C. Hodges, "Hebrews," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, 2 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, SP Publications, 1983, 1985), 2: 792-93.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 112.

the alternative to progress.⁶ Those who had "fallen away" are described by five participles in 6:4-6a. Each of these five participles is governed by the article *τούς* ("those who"). The use of the single article indicates that only one group of individuals is in view.⁷ The individuals are described as follows:

1. *ἀπαξ φωτισθέντας* ("once been enlightened," 6:4a)
2. *γευσαμένους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου* ("have tasted of the heavenly gift," 6:4b)
3. *μετόχους γενηθέντας πνεύματος ἁγίου* ("have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit," 6:4c)
4. *καλὸν γευσαμένους θεοῦ ῥῆμα δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος* ("have tasted the good word of God and the power of the age to come," 6:5)
5. *καὶ παραπεσόντας* ("and have fallen away," 6:6a).

These readers had "once been enlightened." The term *φωτισθέντας* ("being enlightened") is also used in 10:32, where regeneration of the readers is clearly stipulated. The author was equating enlightenment with the reception of the full knowledge of the truth.⁸ This argues strongly for the view that the enlightenment refers to regeneration.⁹ "This is a natural way to refer to the conversion experience (cf. 2 Cor. 4:3-6). The writer's only other use of the verb 'enlightened' (10:32) is used where the reference to true Christian experience can hardly be doubted."¹⁰

The second fact about these readers is that they had "tasted the heavenly gift." The verb *γεύομαι* ("to taste") is to be understood in verse 4 in the sense of "to come to know something."¹¹ The same word is used in 2:9 of Christ, who "tasted" death for everyone. It is inconsistent to have 2:9 mean "drink it all" and 6:4 mean "sampled," as

⁶ For an examination of each of the five warnings of Hebrews and their eschatological perspective, see this writer's work, "An Analysis and Exposition of the Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews" (ThD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1984).

⁷ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), pp. 777, 785-89.

⁸ Marcus Dods, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961), 4: 296.

⁹ Duane A. Dunham, "An Exegetical Examination of the Warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews" (ThD diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1974), p. 159.

¹⁰ Hodges, "Hebrews," p. 794.

¹¹ William F. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 156.

some suggest.¹² The term *δωρεᾶς* ("gift") may be understood in a technical sense as equal to grace.¹³

These individuals are also referred to as "partakers of the Holy Spirit." The concept of being a *μέτοχος* ("companion") resurfaces.¹⁴ *Μέτοχος* is used in 3:1 of a "partaker" of the heavenly calling. Here in 6:4 the individuals are seen as "partners" in the Spirit's activities. If they are no longer *μέτοχος*, it is because they are no longer dependent on the Holy Spirit's power. This is not the same as losing salvation, it is simply a failure to depend on and minister with the Holy Spirit.

Hebrews 6:5 says these individuals had "tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come." The term "good word of God" deals with the present age and "powers of the coming age" directs the audience to the future. The "good word of God" may refer to Jesus' teachings about the kingdom (Heb. 2:3).¹⁵ The signs, wonders, and miracles of Hebrews 2:4 were a foreshadowing of the *δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αιώνος* ("powers of the coming age," i.e., the millennial kingdom). The readers had "tasted" (*γευσαμένους*) or "experienced" this power in their assembly.

The ominous expression *καὶ παραπέσόντας* ("and have fallen away") now appears. The participle *παραπεσούτας* is governed grammatically by the single article *τούς* ("those"), which also governs the previous four participles. Apparently certain individuals had actually fallen away (cf. 10:25); the warning is not "hypothetical."¹⁶ The sober teaching is about a regenerated individual's apostasy.

The word *παραπίπτω* ("fall away") occurs only here in the New Testament. This verb is formed from *παρά* ("beside") and *πίπτω* ("to fall"). What certain readers had fallen away from is not specifically described. Therefore the context becomes the determinative factor as to the meaning of the participle. From Hebrews 3:6, 14; 10:23-25, 35-39, the "falling away" relates to the withdrawal from

¹² John MacArthur, Jr., *Hebrews*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), p. 124.

¹³ C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 2 vols. (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1952), 2:150-51.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the *μέτοχος* ("partner") of Hebrews 1:9, see this writer's work, "The Eschatological Salvation of Hebrews 1:5-2:5," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (January-March 1988): 83-97.

¹⁵ Robert Govett, *Govett on Hebrews* (Miami Springs, FL: Conley and Schoettle Publishing Co., 1981), p. 156.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the warning as "hypothetical," see Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), pp. 113-14.

their Christian confidence and worshiping function in God's house.¹⁷

The internal dullness and immaturity of the readers may have as its outward manifestation the "falling away." A volitional choice to abandon their Christian confidence and worship function may place them in the position of judgment described in 6:7-8. The Apostle Paul knew of believers who had abandoned their faith and had become subjects of discipline (1 Tim. 1:20; 5:15; 2 Tim. 2:17-18).

For those who "fall away" it is *πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν εἰς μετάνοικτιαν* ("impossible to renew them again to repentance," Heb. 6:6). The subject of the infinitive *ἀνακαινίζειν* ("to renew") is not stated. Since God is sovereign and is able to do as He pleases in human affairs, it is incorrect to assume that God is the subject of the infinitive. It seems best to supply *ἡμᾶς* ("us") or *τίνα* ("anyone") as the intended subject. The verse would then read, "It is impossible for us, or anyone, to renew them again to repentance." This translation parallels the writer's admonition in 3:13 in which the readers are urged to encourage each other daily to avoid a hardened heart. The warning in chapter 6 concerns the danger of spiritual dullness and immaturity. This immaturity may result in a falling away from their confidence and worship participation in God's house detailed in 3:1-4:13. If this were to occur, those individuals would be beyond encouragement by others in the community to repent and press on to Christian maturity. They would be "hard of hearing" and beyond human persuasion.

The following participles—*ἀνασταυροῦντας* ("crucifying") and *παραδειγματίζοντας* ("openly disgracing")—are the reasons repentance is impossible.¹⁸ The term *ἀνασταυροῦντας* is best understood as "recrucifying."¹⁹ Morris notes, "The author is saying that those who deny Christ in this way are really taking their stand among those who crucified Jesus. In heart and mind they make themselves one with those who put him to death on the cross at Calvary."²⁰

They subject the Son of God to "open disgrace." Realignment themselves with those who hated the Messiah would result in a public disgrace of the name of Christ. These actions are the result of

¹⁷ For a discussion of the believer's confidence and worship function in God's household, see "The Kingdom Rest in Hebrews 3:1-4:13," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (April-June 1988): 185-96; also see Hodges, "Hebrews," pp. 794-95.

¹⁸ James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924), p. 79.

¹⁹ Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, p. 60.

²⁰ Leon Morris, "Hebrews," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Caebelein, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 12:55.

a spiritually dull heart. These individuals become impervious to all efforts by others in calling them to repentance.

This alignment seems to have been with a sectarian form of Judaism similar to that of Qumran.²¹ This action is so heinous that a reversal appears impossible from the human perspective. The only option facing those who "fall away" is judgment. An analogy with nature describes the inevitable judgment.

HEBREWS 6:7-8

The illustration from nature forms the only prophetic or eschatological statement in the warning.²² The illustration clearly shows that a judgment is in view. Is this judgment temporal discipline of believers²³ or a final judgment resulting in eternal damnation?²⁴

The conjunction *γάρ* ("for") links the illustration of 6:7-8 with the previous section, showing that the readers of 5:11-6:6 are still in view.

The clause, "For ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it," is understood as the subject of verses 7-8.²⁵ The same "ground" (*γῆ*) is in view in both verses. The difference is found in the produce that results from the rain. The ground in verse 7 produces vegetation, green plants, and herbs. This produce is useful and receives "a blessing from God." The rain-soaked ground fulfilled its God-designed function by providing the produce for the farmer, which resulted in a blessing being received from God. Contextually this illustrates the individual believer who obediently chooses to press on to spiritual maturity. The concept of usefulness is seen in natural produce. This produce is described in verse 10 as the ministries of work and love among the readers. These activities, like proper produce, result in a believer receiving God's blessing.

Hebrews 6:8 shows the negative side of the illustration. The *γῆ* ("ground") of verse 7 is the antecedent of the participle *ἐκφέρουσα*

²¹ The background and occasion for the writing of Hebrews has parallels similar to those of Qumran. For a discussion of these parallels, see Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 10-11; Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 1:242ff.; "L'épître aux Hébreux"; Jean-Baptiste Apollos, "Les Hellenistes et Qumran," *Revue de Qumran* 1 (1958-59): 365-90; Yigael Yadin, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, vol. 4 of *Aspects of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Chaim Rabin and Yigael Yadin (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1965), pp. 36-55.

²² Stanley D. Toussaint, "The Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews," *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (Spring 1982): 74.

²³ Hodges, "Hebrews," pp. 795-96.

²⁴ Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), p. 109.

²⁵ Dods, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," 4:299.

("yields"). Thus the same land is in view but this time the rain yields "thorns and thistles," not useful produce. This condition is analogous to the readers' dullness and immaturity described in 5:11-14. Spiritually immature and dull believers will produce thorns and thistles.

Three phrases describe the uselessness of the land that grows thorns and thistles: *ἀδόκιμος* ("worthless"), *κατάρας ἐγγύς* ("near to being cursed"), and *ἥς τὸ τέλος εἰς καῦσιν* ("its end is for burning").

Ἀδόκιμος occurs in classical Greek, the Septuagint, and eight times in the New Testament. It generally refers to being disqualified or unapproved. In 1 Corinthians 9:27 Paul referred to his efforts to be faithful in the Christian life. He used the metaphor of competing in games for which he disciplined himself so as not to be *ἀδόκιμος* ("disqualified").

Some scholars understand the "curse" of Hebrews 6:8 to recall the incident of man's fall (Gen. 3). However, the curse in Genesis 3 resulted in thorns and thistles, whereas in Hebrews 6:8 thorns and thistles resulted in the curse. There is a cause-and-effect inversion between the curse in Genesis and Hebrews.²⁶ The curse in Hebrews is the consequence of the rain-soaked earth failing to fulfill its natural function, the production of useful vegetation.

Moses taught the principle that for Israel obedience results in blessing, and disobedience results in cursing (Deut. 28-30). The Old Testament cursings were temporal, not soteriological in nature and did not result in eternal damnation. The teaching of blessing for obedience and cursing for disobedience was an integral part of Jewish law and thought. It is reasonable to understand that the Jewish readers of Hebrews, after becoming Christians would view this principle in an individual sense instead of in a national sense.

This principle parallels the teaching concerning the produce of the soil. If the soil yields useful produce, it receives God's blessing (Heb. 6:7). If the soil produces thorns and thistles, it becomes disqualified, worthless, and is near to being cursed. The analogy is lucid—obedience in the life of a believer results in blessing; disobedience in the life of a believer results in a useless life for God and the possibility of receiving temporal discipline from the Lord (12:5-11).

The agricultural imagery continues: "it ends up being burned" (6:8). The metaphor of burning has caused many to think this verse refers to hell.²⁷ To insist that burning denotes "the future of the

²⁶ Jean Héring, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. A. W. Heathcote and P. J. Allcock (London: Epworth Press, 1970), p. 48.

²⁷ For example Toussaint, "The Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews," p. 75.

damned" is to ignore the immediate context and to press the agricultural illustration beyond its intent. Soteriology is not being discussed in this passage. The context is a call for believers to press on to maturity. The danger is a dullness of hearing which may result in a disqualification and temporal discipline. Further, the analogy of burning relates only to the worthless thorns and thistles, not to the land itself. The fire would destroy only the worthless fruit, not the soil. The Elder Pliny (ca. A.D. 112) attests to the fact that land was burned to remove weeds and stubble.²⁸ The purpose of the burning in Hebrews 6 is to remove the thorns and thistles (i.e., the results of disobedience) by means of temporal judgment (cf. 12:5-11).

The specifics of this temporal discipline are not stipulated. Biblically God's discipline of His children is for the purpose of bringing them back to usefulness and productivity (1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20; Heb. 12:5-11).

An eschatological perspective is implicit within the burning imagery. For believers in Christ there will be a "burning" of all their useless motives, thoughts, and actions at the judgment seat of Christ (Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10). Paul used identical imagery in 1 Corinthians 3:9-15: "you are God's field . . . each 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. . . . If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire."

Although temporal judgment for disobedience is in view in Hebrews 6:5-8, an eschatological perspective appears implicit also. Terms such as *ἀδόκιμος* ("worthless") and *καῦσιν* ("burning") imply eschatological loss.

Believers' soteriological status is settled on the basis of grace through faith alone (Eph. 2:8-10; Titus 3:3-7). They will never be judged to determine their eternal destiny (John 5:19-29; Rom. 3:21-30; 8:1; 2 Cor. 5:17; 1 John 5:13). However, the Scriptures teach that believers will be evaluated for reward or loss of reward for their motives, thoughts, and actions as disciples of Christ.

For the readers of Hebrews, failure to press on to maturity might result in temporal discipline. It seems reasonable from Hebrews 3:1-4:13 that this might sometimes include the loss of physical life (cf. 1 Cor. 11:30; 1 John 5:16-17). Theologically it is clear that present unfaithfulness will result in loss of reward at the judgment seat of Christ. The result for the believer is not loss of eternal salvation but a forfeiting of inheritance-rest, reward, and position in the coming millennial kingdom.

²⁸ Elder Pliny *Historia Naturalis* XVII 300. 72.

HEBREWS 6:9-12

Following the ominous words of warning are words of comfort and encouragement. Hebrews 6:9 refers to the readers as *ἀγαπητοί* ("beloved"), a term used in Scripture only of believers. The author wrote with tender pastoral encouragement when he said, "We are convinced of better things concerning you." Hodges writes:

The author did not want his readers to believe that he had despaired of them. Instead, he was convinced of *better things in your case*. The words are like those of a pastor who, after warning his congregation of a dangerous course of action might say: "But I am sure you people would never do that!" The words are not a theological proposition, as they are sometimes wrongly taken, but an expression of hope.²⁹

The writer was confident of "better things that accompany salvation." The *σωτηρία* ("salvation") is to be understood in the same way as in 1:14; 2:3, 10; 5:9; 9:28—as referring to eschatological victory, glory, and ruling with the Messiah. The author was confident that his readers would press on to maturity and receive these blessings.

The writer's confidence was founded on God's faithfulness and the readers' work and love toward other believers (6:10). This work and love parallel the earlier exhortation in 3:13 to encourage one another daily. The readers were not beyond renewal.

Hebrews 6:11 encourages the readers to "demonstrate" or "show" (*ἐνδεικνυσθαι*) diligence. The purpose of this demonstration is the full and final realization of hope. Michel explains that the readers may not realize the "full hope," "conviction," or "certainty" if they failed to be diligent. The possibility of loss is real,³⁰ but perseverance would result in eschatological blessing (6:9).

In 6:12 the purpose of the exhortation is that the readers not be *νωθροί* ("sluggish"). The same term is used in 5:11. Their "sluggishness" or "dullness" as a manifestation of their immaturity was to be replaced by diligence. In contrast they are to be imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. Hebrews 6:13-20 describes Abraham as one whose faith is to be imitated: "Having patiently waited, he obtained the promise" (v. 15).

The concept of "promise" occurs throughout the epistle (4:1; 6:12-13, 15, 17; 7:6; 8:6; 9:15; 10:23, 36; 11:9 [twice], 11, 13, 17, 33, 39; 12:26). Sixteen of the 18 references refer to the millennium.

The author of Hebrews clearly states that perseverance is essential for inheriting the promises. This inheritance of the promises

²⁹ Hodges, "Hebrews," p. 796.

³⁰ Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1966), pp. 154-55.

should not be equated with eternal salvation. The inheritance cannot be soteriological, for eternal salvation is by grace through faith. Throughout Hebrews perseverance is said to be essential for enjoyment of the eschatological promises (3:6, 14; 4:1; 5:9; 6:11-12; 10:23, 36).

Since the readers had not yet entered into a permanent state of dullness, it was possible through God's working in them and their perseverance for them to inherit the promises related to the coming age (i.e., rewards and positions in the kingdom).

Conclusion

The warning of Hebrews 5:11-6:12 is addressed to regenerated individuals and is given to motivate them to spiritual maturity. They were in danger of falling away from their Christian confidence and worship function in the house of God. If they were to "fall away," it would be impossible for the community to call them to repentance because of their spiritual dullness. The analogy of rain-soaked ground and its produce suggested both temporal and eschatological judgment.

With a pastor's heart the writer encouraged his readers to move toward maturity through their ministry of love and good works. Through present diligence they would realize their full eschatological hope as those who would inherit the promises of rewards and position in the millennial kingdom.