

Main Idea: Hebrews 6:4-8 offers a sober warning about the danger of falling away. Our warning text includes two considerations.

Key: When studying a *verse* keep in mind the purpose of the *book*.

1. The immediate purpose of Hebrews is to teach the truth about Christ.
 2. The ultimate purpose is to show that following Christ is worth the cost.
- I. Our text presents an impossibility (4-6).
- A. The writer describes a group of people (4-5).
 1. They were once enlightened.
 2. They tasted the heavenly gift.
 3. They have shared in the Holy Spirit.
 4. They tasted the goodness of God's Word.
 5. They tasted the powers of the coming age.
 - B. The writer confronts a problem (6).
 1. Suppose they fall away.
 2. If they do, they cannot be restored.
 3. They would be re-crucifying Christ.
 4. They would bring public shame to Christ.
- II. Our text presents an illustration (7-8).
- A. Land that soaks up rain and produces a good crop has God's blessing (7).
 - B. Land that soaks up rain and produces thorns is facing a curse (8).
- Make It Personal: What's the point of our text?
1. People who truly know Christ won't fall away and lose their salvation.
 2. People who truly know Christ will take inventory of their spiritual condition.
 3. People who truly know Christ must take steps to grow.
 4. People who truly know Christ will follow Christ because He is worth it.

I asked you to put your steel-toed boots on a couple of weeks ago as we opened Hebrews 6 together, and you'll likely want to keep them on as we open today's text. We're coming to one of the most difficult, challenging, convicting, and needful passages in the Bible.

The title of today's message is, "A Warning about Falling Away from Christ." We'll be exploring Hebrews 6:4-8, but let's read the fuller context, including our last message in verses 1-3 as well as next week's passage for the tone changes in verse 9 and we must keep this in mind.

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 6:1-12

Warning messages are a big part of our lives. We see them when we are in our cars and look at the mirror: "Warning: Objects in the mirror may be larger than they appear." They're on coffee cups from McDonalds: "Warning: The contents of this drink may burn you!" We see them on the tags of our clothing: "Don't wash this in hot water!"

We hear lots of warnings, too. I still remember some of the warnings my parents gave me as a child. Never put a plastic bag over your head. Always look both ways before crossing a street. Make sure you brush your teeth twice a day or you'll get a cavity.

What's the purpose of a warning? It gets your attention. It prompts you to think twice about a danger or a problem to avoid.

The Bible is full of *warning texts*. Here's a warning from Jesus in Matthew 7:21, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven." That's a warning against presuming you're right with God just because you have given the correct profession, "Lord, Lord." Here's another warning from Jesus in John 15:6, a

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warning against being a *Sunday only* Christian, “If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers.”

Paul had this to say about warnings in Acts 20:31, “So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.” The truth is, just like the believers living in Ephesus, we need warnings, and we’re in trouble when we surround ourselves with preachers who refuse to give them to us.

This morning we come to one of the most challenging warning texts in all of God’s Word. When I’m training church leaders, I can count on this question during the Q & A sessions (it’s happened in Eastern Europe and Asia), “What about Hebrews 6?” They’re talking about Hebrews 6:4-8 and this sobering warning about the danger of falling away.

“It is impossible,” says the writer, “for those who have once been enlightened...if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance (NIV).”

William Barclay says, “This is one of the most terrible passages in Scripture.”¹ I’m not sure about calling it *terrible*, but it certainly is troubling. This warning-text raises several tough questions.

There’s the question about the *people*—who does the writer have in mind here, Christians, non-Christians, perhaps professing Christians? Then there’s the question about the *problem*—What does “fall away” mean in verse 6? Does it mean that a Christian can fall away and lose his salvation? And that leads to the question about the *consequence*—Why is it impossible for those who have ‘fallen away’ (whoever *they* are and whatever *that* means) to be “brought back to repentance,” as verse 6 states? What’s more, there’s the question about the *purpose* of the text—Is it intended to warn real Christians to persevere, or perhaps to warn pretend Christians to admit the truth, or what?

Here’s an important principle to keep in mind when studying the Bible. **When studying a verse keep in mind the purpose of the book.** We can use the Bible to “prove” just about anything if we rip verses out of context. Whenever we open God’s Word, we need to keep in mind the purpose that the human writer had in mind when the Spirit of God guided him to write that inspired text.

So what’s the purpose of Hebrews? Actually, there are two related purposes, one immediate and the other ultimate.

1. *The immediate purpose of Hebrews is to teach the truth about Christ.* And so, when we read through this epistle we discover many things about the person and work of Jesus Christ, that He is the Son of God and the creator of the universe (1:2), the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of God’s being (1:3), that He became a man so that He might suffer and taste death in behalf of sinners (2:9), set them free from death (2:15), provide an atonement for their sins (2:17), and more! The first ten chapters of Hebrews tell us that Christ is superior to angels, superior to Moses, and superior to the priesthood of Aaron, indeed that He is the High Priest who can reconcile sinners like us to God.

But teaching the truth about Christ is a *means* to something, not an end. Truth isn’t taught here merely for academic reasons (just to give us facts). This truth is intended to *do* something, to *accomplish* something. And what is that? In Hebrews...

2. *The ultimate purpose is to show that following Christ is worth the cost.* Who first received this book we call Hebrews? The *Hebrews* did, an assembly (or assemblies) of Jewish Christians. And something was happening to these Christ-followers. They were facing intense opposition and pressure from their Jewish family members and neighbors to turn from Christ and return to the old ways of Judaism.

¹ William Barclay, p. 56.

That's why Hebrews was written. The book actually functions like a sermon, a forty-five-minute sermon (that's how long it takes to read it) that probably that someone read initially in a church worship service to encourage these Jewish Christians.

In 10:32-34 the writer reminds them that in the early days when they first converted to Christ, they stood their ground in the face of great suffering. They were "publicly exposed to insult and persecution" and they "stood side by side with those who were so treated." They visited their brothers in prison and "joyfully accepted the confiscation of property."

And what kept them going? He reminds them in Hebrews 10:34, "You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because *you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.*" That's what kept them going. That's why they responded with joy even when they lost their houses, because they had better possessions. Where? Not in this life, but in the life to come.

That's the purpose of Hebrews, to put a shot of adrenaline into the veins of these first century believers. And in ours. Is it hard to live for Jesus in this world? Yes. For Jews and non-Jews like us as well. But it's worth it! Following Jesus is worth the cost.

But apparently, some in this first century church weren't quite so sure. They were getting weary and it seems that some were looking for the exit sign. Consequently, the writer gave them, not just a *reminder* that following Christ is worth it, but also a series of *warnings*, five warnings throughout the book that address what happens when a professing believer chooses *not* to follow Christ to the end.²

This brings us to our text which is the heart of the third warning text. Hebrews 6:4-8 presents us with a sobering warning about the danger of falling away. The writer invites us to consider two matters. The first is an impossibility (4-6). The second is an illustration (7-8).

I. Our text presents an impossibility (4-6).

Verse 4 begins, "It is *impossible.*" Elsewhere in Hebrews we're told that three other things are impossible. Hebrews 6:18 says, "It is impossible for God to lie." Hebrews 10:4 says, "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." And Hebrews 11:6 says, "And without faith it is impossible to please God..."

What does Hebrews 6:4 say is impossible? It doesn't say. The writer doesn't state the impossibility until verse 6. But to understand what it is, we must back up. The flow of the text begins with a command in verse 1, "Let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity." Status quo is unacceptable for Christians. We're supposed to be growing. We're supposed to be building on the basic doctrines we learned when we first came to know Christ.

"And this we will do, if God permits," says the writer in verse 3.

"But what if I don't want to go on to maturity?" someone might ask. "What if I am content to stay where I am spiritually? What would you say to that?" What I would say isn't the issue. What God's Word says is, and beginning in verse 4 the writer addresses that kind of thinking head-on.

In the Greek text the first word of verse 4 is "for." "For it is impossible," says the writer. *For* indicates that what follows is the reason for the command in verse 1. And the reason comes in the form of a warning.

But notice how the writer shifts pronouns, from first person pronouns ("we" and "us") in verses 1-3 to third person pronouns ("they" and "them") in verses 4-8 and then back to

² In the book there are five warning texts (in 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:14-29).

first person pronouns in verse 9 and following. Why the switch? Some say it indicates he's talking about another group of people. I think a better explanation is that he's placing a warning before this same group of people who are hearing this sermon being read, but he wants to put this warning before them in the most objective and least offensive way he can.

Let's take a careful look, first at the *people*, and then at the *problem*.

A. The writer describes a group of people (4-5). Listen to the ESV, "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."³

Who are these people? Bible scholars I respect differ. John MacArthur makes a good case and concludes that they're *unsaved* people. J. Vernon McGee makes a good case and says they are *saved* people. Godly people certainly differ over Hebrews 6.

The writer uses a string of eight participles in verses 4-6, the first five are aorist tense and the final three are present tense. In so doing, he is identifying the people he has in mind. They possess five characteristics.

1. *They were once enlightened.* The Greek word *photizo* means "to give light" and "to bring to light." In Hebrews 10:32 the writer states, "Remember those earlier days after you had *received the light...*" That's the same word *photizo*. In 10:32 he says it's what happened to his readers (they "received the light" and "were enlightened"). Now in 6:4 he lets us know that it happened to the group of people he had in mind.

And don't miss the little word "once." They were *once* enlightened. To borrow from Paul's explanation in 2 Corinthians 4:6, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

2. *They tasted the heavenly gift.* This raises two questions. One, what is the "heavenly gift"? And two, what does it mean to "taste" it?

Let's take the first question. What's the heavenly gift? James 1:17 says, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights." So, in the ultimate sense, every good gift is from God in heaven and is thus a heavenly gift. But this is a specific gift.

Think of John 3:16. God so loved the world that He gave His Son. Christ then is certainly the greatest heavenly gift, and related to that is the work that God does to bring sinners into His family. As James 1:18 explains, "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth." Acts 10:45 refers to the "gift of the Holy Spirit," for the Spirit is the agent who births a sinner into God's family. Ephesians 2:8-9 likewise indicates that *salvation* is the gift of God.

So, this is the heavenly gift mentioned in Hebrews 6:4. The writer is referring to God's salvation offered through Christ administered by the Holy Spirit.

Now the second question. What does it mean to say that some have *tasted* this gift? Some say that "tasted" implies that they just *sampled* Christ and His salvation. For instance, if I said I just *tasted* the peach pie you made for me, you might assume that I didn't actually eat it. Our English word "taste" can carry the thought of putting the tip of the fork to my tongue to check out the flavor but not actually ingesting the food. But this

³ The NIV says, "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age..."

Greek word is stronger. Hebrews 2:9 says that Jesus became a man in order to “taste” death. Our Savior didn’t merely *sample* death on the cross, but experienced it fully.

Some early church fathers suggested the enlightening referred to believer’s baptism and that the tasting was a reference to their participation in the eucharist or communion. And that this would indicate these are people who have joined the church and participate regularly in its worship services. While I don’t see baptism and the eucharist in this text, I do agree that the writer isn’t talking about people ignorant to the gospel. These are not individuals who merely *sampled* Christ. The language is strong. These are individuals who have been *enlightened* and have *tasted* the gift of salvation in Christ.

3. *They have shared in the Holy Spirit.* We’ve seen this word before in Hebrews. In 3:1 we read, “Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling.” In 3:14, “We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end.” Our text indicates the writer has in mind people who share in the Holy Spirit.

4. *They tasted the goodness of God’s Word.* It’s the same word for tasted we saw in the previous verse. In addition to tasting the heavenly gift, the writer now describes folks who have tasted the goodness of the word of God. God’s Word is good. It does so many good things for us. It brings joy to our families, meaning to our friendships, peace to our anxious hearts. And most of all, it reveals God to us! This Book is sweeter than honey and the honeycomb (Psalm 19:10). And these readers had tasted this sweetness.

5. *They tasted the powers of the coming age.* The coming age is the kingdom age which Christ Himself will inaugurate when He returns. In the coming age there will be no sickness, no pain, no death, no sin, no hindrances to joy. Yet those who are in Christ experience a sampling of all that *now*.

Let that sink in. If we are in Christ, we have tasted something our non-Christian friends have not tasted. We’ve had a foretaste of the sweetness of the age to come. As the poet put it:

“Heaven above is softer blue,
Earth around is sweeter green;
Something lives in every hue,
Christless eyes have never seen;
Birds with gladder songs o’erflow,
Flowers with deeper beauties shine,
Since I know, as now I know,
I am his, and he is mine.”⁴

Now take another look at the group of people the writer has in mind. He says they are people who have been enlightened, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted salvation, tasted the goodness of God’s Word, and tasted the powers of the coming age. That’s the *who* in this warning. And he’s telling us that there’s something that is *impossible* for these people. This brings us to the *problem*.

B. The writer confronts a problem (6). Notice verse 6 (ESV), “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.” The NIV says, “It is impossible for those [who have experienced the above privileges]...if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.”

Some people point to this verse and say, “See! Those words ‘fallen away’ prove a person can lose their salvation!”

⁴ Taken from William Barclay, p. 57.

But wait. If you use this passage to prove that salvation can be lost you must also use this passage to conclude that the person who loses his salvation cannot regain it. He says it is impossible to “restore again to repentance” those who have “fallen away”.

No, this is not a proof-text for the insecurity of the believer. This is not talking about a true Christian losing his or her salvation. What is it talking about? The writer is warning his readers (then and now) to think about something very serious. Let’s follow his line of thinking carefully.

1. *Suppose they fall away.* The ESV says, “And then have fallen away.” The NIV says, “If they fall away.” The KJV says, “If they shall fall away.” In the original Greek it’s simply one word, a participle, *parapesontas*. The “if” isn’t in the text. It may be implied, but it’s not stated.

This term comes from the Greek verb *parapipto* from the root *pipto*, meaning “to fall.” *Pipto* is a rather common word in the New Testament. Houses fall (Matt 7:25), cities fall (Rev. 16:19), stones fall (Luke 20:18), bread crumbs fall (Matt 15:27), seeds fall (Matt. 13:4), and birds fall (Matt. 10:29).

But in Hebrews 6:6, the writer attaches a prefix *para* to *pipto*. It’s the only place in the New Testament this word *parapipto* appears. The prefix *para* can be translated a variety of ways depending on the context: “from,” “by,” “besides,” etc. The *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* offers this definition: “to abandon a former relationship or association, or to dissociate (a type of reversal of beginning to associate); ‘to fall away, to forsake, to turn away.’”

This doesn’t seem to refer to falling into sins in general, but falling into a very specific sin. Think of it as a specific *state* of sin. John Calvin says this refers not to sins like theft, or murder, or adultery, or drunkenness, but to apostasy, “*a complete falling away from the Gospel*, not one in which the sinner has offended God in some one part only, but in which he has utterly renounced His grace... This is complete renunciation of God.”⁵

This was no moot issue for the first readers of this book. J. Vernon McGee explains:

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 inferring 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 either exhibit 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.⁶

⁵ John Calvin, pp. 74-5.

⁶ J. Vernon McGee. I’m not sure exact source, but I believe it is from his commentary.

Now suppose that happens. Suppose people who have tasted the heavenly gift *fall away*, and renounce Christ, and go back to the temple, and abandon their former association with Christ and His people. Then what?

2. *If they do, they cannot be restored.* Listen again to his argument, “It is impossible for those [who have experienced the privileges listed in verses 4-5]...if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance.”

It’s called apostasy (from the Greek *apo* “away from”, and *stasis* the verb meaning “to set, place, or stand”). It means to withdraw or defect.⁷

The question is, would true believers ever do that? The answer is, no they wouldn’t. How do we know? For starters, as we’ll see in the next passage the writer himself says he doesn’t expect that to happen with his readers, for he states in verse 9, “Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation.” That’s because true believers respond by God’s grace by doing “things that accompany salvation.” And denying Christ is not one of those things.

So true believers won’t do this. If they won’t, what’s the point? Why would the writer of Hebrews give this warning to a group of professing Christians if true Christians won’t (indeed *can’t*) fall away? I think the key to the answer is in that word *professing*. We’ll come back to that in moment.

But first, let’s notice the textual reasons the writer gives, as indicated by the next word in verse 6. In the ESV it is “*since*.” In the NIV, “*because*.” They cannot be restored *because of this*.

3. *They would be re-crucifying Christ.* “Since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm” says the writer (ESV). This is what individuals who profess to know Christ would be doing if they fall away and renounce Christ.

Barclay tells of what he calls “the great *Quo vadis* legend.” He writes, “In the Neronian persecution Peter was caught in Rome and his courage failed. Down the Appian Way he fled for his life. Suddenly there was a figure standing in his path. It was Jesus himself. ‘*Domine,*’ said Peter, ‘*quo vadis?* Lord, where are you going?’ ‘I am going back to Rome to be crucified again, this time in your stead.’ And Peter, shamed into heroism, turned back to Rome and died a martyr’s death.”⁸

True believers do not disown Christ because to do so would be to re-crucify Christ, and that’s unthinkable for those who love the Savior. Something else makes it unthinkable.

4. *They would bring public shame to Christ.* “Subjecting him to public disgrace,” the writer states at the end of verse 6 in the NIV. This is what happens when a person who previously declared allegiance to Christ turns away from Christ. He is, “holding him up to contempt,” says the ESV.

Now back to the question, *why?* Why is the writer of Hebrews sending this warning to a church, to a group of professing Christians? I think it boils down to a very basic and tragic reality. In a group of people who *profess* Christ, it’s always possible there are those who do not *possess* Christ.

⁷ As William Barclay observes, “In any such age apostasy is the supreme sin.” When the authorities tell you, “It’s either renounce Christ or go to prison,” you’re faced with the temptation to deny Christ and save your neck. In your response, you are making a loud and clear statement, for if you give in to the pressure, you are saying, “My life and my comfort and my safety are more important to me than Christ. Following Christ is not worth the cost.”

⁸ William Barclay, p. 58.

Jesus speaks of this reality in his parable of the four soils in Luke 8:13, “Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.”

Has that ever happened? Yes. Remember **Simon Magus**? We meet him in Acts 8. He was a powerful sorcerer in Samaria until Philip came and preached the gospel, and people turned to Christ. Acts 8:13 says, “Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.”

In time, however, Simon showed his true colors and offered the apostles money if they would give him the Holy Spirit power they demonstrated in doing miracles. In response Peter rebuked Simon in Acts 8:20-23, “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.”

What happened to Simon Magus? Here’s a man who professed Christ, was baptized, who experienced the wonderful benefits of belonging to the Christian community. But, as F. F. Bruce points out, in the following decades Simon showed himself “to be the most determined opponent of apostolic Christianity.”⁹ Here’s a man who tasted the heavenly gift and the goodness of God’s Word, but Christ wasn’t enough for him.

Isn’t that likewise what happened to **Judas Iscariot**? He spent three years with Jesus and experienced spiritual blessings and privileges we can hardly imagine. He talked with Jesus, ate with Jesus, laughed with Jesus, listened to Jesus’ sermons, carried Jesus’ money (he was the treasurer for the group, John 13:29), received power from Jesus to do miracles, heard gospel invitations and gave them, but in the end he sold his heart to Satan and betrayed the Savior he pretended to love.¹⁰

It’s a tragic reality that one’s heart may be far from the One he professes to serve.¹¹ I think this is the concern of the writer of Hebrews. Philip Hughes explains, “What he has reason to fear is that some among them who have professed Christian faith, enjoyed Christian fellowship, and engaged in Christian witness may prove to be hypocrites and enemies of Christ and, by turning away from the light they have known, show that they do not belong to God’s people at all.”¹²

Let me say this clearly. This text is not saying that we should ever give up on people, including those who are presently mocking our Savior. Our responsibility is clear according to 2 Timothy 2:25, “Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth.”

Nor is this text saying that some people are too far gone for God to save. God’s grace is greater than all our sin, as Romans 5:20 declares, “Where sin abounded grace did much more abound.” If you today desire God’s forgiveness, you can receive it through Christ.

Yet that is something the person described in Hebrews 6 will *not* do. He’s already “tried Jesus” and like Judas has sold out for the best this world can offer. F. F. Bruce sums it up, “God has pledged Himself to pardon all who truly repent, but Scripture and

⁹ F. F. Bruce, p. 122.

¹⁰ Another example might be Demas who loved the present world and deserted Paul (2 Tim. 4:10).

¹¹ To borrow a thought from Philip Hughes, p. 218.

¹² Philip Hughes, p. 222.

experience alike suggest that it is possible for human beings to arrive at a state of heart and life where they can no longer repent.”¹³

Leon Morris puts it this way, “The writer is saying that when people have entered into the Christian experience far enough to know what it is all about and have then turned away, then, as far as they themselves are concerned, they are crucifying Christ. In that state, they cannot repent.”¹⁴

Remember the Hebrew spies who searched out the promised land? What did they bring with them after their survey trip? They carried home samples of the produce of the land. Yet ten of those men, after getting a taste of God’s goodness, perished in the wilderness. Why? Because of the proud-hearted sin of unbelief.¹⁵

Our text presents an impossibility. This is point one. Now point two.

II. Our text presents an illustration (7-8).

The illustration is meant to illumine, to shed valuable light on the meaning of verses 4-6. It’s very simple and straightforward. I’ll read it and offer two conclusions from it.

Listen to verses 7-8, “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.”¹⁶

The illustration is quite common to life. There’s land. There’s rain. There are crops. There are also thorns. The crops are a blessing. The thorns must be removed and burned up. We’ve all seen it. Here are the two conclusions.

A. Land that soaks up rain and produces a good crop has God’s blessing (7).

B. Land that soaks up rain and produces thorns is facing a curse (8). Notice the similarities. Both pieces of land receive the rain, and both pieces of land soak up the rain. But only the land in verse 7 produces a useful crop. The land in verse 8 produces thorns and thistles which are worthless and consequently are heading for the fire.

Make It Personal: What’s the point of our text? Consider four implications...

1. *People who truly know Christ won’t fall away and lose their salvation.* The Bible is full of promises to support this, like this one from Jesus’ lips in John 10:27-28, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.” The Savior will not let go of His people. Those who truly know Christ will never fall away and lose the salvation He has given them. By His grace, they will persevere because He perseveres.

No, the security of Christ’s people is not in question by the writer of Hebrews. But this is. As F. F. Bruce explains, “In these verses he is not questioning the perseverance of the saints; we might say that rather he is insisting that those who persevere are the true saints.”¹⁷ This brings us to the second implication.

¹³ Quote taken from Raymond Brown, p. 110. F. F. Bruce also offers this insight, “He [the writer of Hebrews] is stating a practical truth that has verified itself repeatedly in the experience of the visible Church. Those who have shared the covenant privileges of the people of God, and then deliberately renounce them, are the most difficult persons to reclaim for the faith.”¹³

¹⁴ Leon Morris, p. 56.

¹⁵ Observation by F. F. Bruce, p. 119.

¹⁶ Verses 7-8 in the NIV, “Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.”

¹⁷ F. F. Bruce, p. 118.

2. *People who truly know Christ will take inventory of their spiritual condition.*

Back to our earlier question. Why would the writer give this warning about apostasy if he is writing to believers? Calvin offers this helpful response, “My answer is that he is giving them early warning of the danger, so that they may be on their guard against it.”

We need this warning. We need it early and regularly. And why? Here’s a very practical reason, as Calvin again explains, “When we turn aside from the straight way, we not only make excuses for our vices to others, but also impose them on ourselves. Satan creeps up on us stealthily, and allures us gradually by subtly hidden devices, so that when we go astray we are not conscious of so straying. We slip down gradually, until at last we fall headlong.”¹⁸

Oh, dear friends, I urge you this morning. Take inventory. People who truly know Christ are not afraid to take inventory, for the Spirit will give them assurance. People who do not know Christ need to take inventory, so the Spirit can show them the truth about their dead condition. Do you truly know Christ, my friend? Is He so precious to you that you are living for Him now and would lay down your life for Him if required?

3. *People who truly know Christ must take steps to grow.* This is the charge of Hebrews 6. Let us leave the ABCs and *go on to maturity!*

I appreciate J. Vernon McGee’s pastoral application of Hebrews 6. He writes:

“The writer is not discussing the question of salvation at all in this passage. I believe he is describing saved people...The whole tenor of the text reveals that he is speaking of rewards which are the result of salvation...The writer of Hebrews is talking about the fruit of salvation, not about the root of salvation...The whole tenor of this passage is that he is warning them of the possibility of losing their reward.

McGee then cites 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 and remarks:

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.

Listen to the warning today, my friends, Maturity matters. Taking steps to grow matters. If we truly value Christ, we will make sacrifices, doing so gladly, so we may please Him. So be honest. What kind of sacrifices do you need to make to grow in Christ, and are you willing to make them? It all boils down to this.

¹⁸ John Calvin, p. 75.

4. *People who truly know Christ will follow Christ because He is worth it.* The readers of this letter faced a very real test to their faith, one that many believers in the world are facing today and that we ourselves may soon face.

Polycarp, born in AD 69, faced such a test. He was in his nineties when persecution broke out in Smyrna where he served as pastor of the church. His flock persuaded him to leave the city and go to a village farm to avoid the impending danger, which he did. Raymond Brown tells what happened next:

“Christians in Smyrna were arrested and brought before the Roman Pro-Consul, who sought to persuade them to take the oath of allegiance to the emperor, acknowledging Caesar as Lord, and to offer pagan sacrifice. A man named Quintus was remembered because ‘he played the coward’ and complied, but most of the Christians from Smyrna remained true to Christ. They were scourged, burned alive, tortured on the rack, and torn by wild beasts. After a few days of this public spectacle, the crowd in the arena became restless and called for a search to be made for Polycarp...

A young slave revealed under torture where he could be found, and the police captain, with a detachment of cavalry, was dispatched to bring him to the arena. When Polycarp entered the arena there was a deafening roar from the spectators, but it could not drown out the heavenly voice which the aged-pastor heard: ‘Be strong Polycarp, and play the man.’

The Pro-Consul...urged the old pastor to respect his age, and pressed him to take the oath, swearing by the genius of Caesar: ‘Take the oath and I will let you go. Revile Christ.’ Polycarp replied without hesitation: ‘For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has never wronged me. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?’... It was decreed that Polycarp should be burned alive. He was bound and consigned to the flames.”¹⁹

What gave Polycarp the courage to stand even unto death? Why didn’t he deny Christ and save his neck? Raymond Brown says it well, “It would have been like crucifying the Son of God again, because it would mean consenting with those who nailed him to the cross. It would have signified a willingness to hold Christ up to public contempt. Polycarp refused such an unacceptable release.”²⁰

Closing Song: #369 “*O Jesus, I Have Promised*” (all four verses)

This is such a fitting song. The Christian life involves promises. Our promises to Jesus. His promises to us. Warning texts remind us of the importance of keeping our promises and it’s His promise to us that makes it possible.

This evening: Nicu and Marta Sotir, pastor from Romania

¹⁹ Raymond Brown, p. 92.

²⁰ Raymond Brown, p. 93.