

Eternal Security ~ Part 5

Apostasy ~ Part 2

In my last post, we began to explore the issue of **Apostasy** and **Backsliding**. In this post, I want to dig a little deeper on the issue of **Apostasy** by turning to Hebrews 6:4-6.

As I was contemplating and praying about this topic of **Eternal Security**, my daily reading plan through the Brit Hadashah, Psalms and Proverbs from YouVersion lead me to the Letter to the Hebrews. This passage hit me up alongside the head:

"For when people have once been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, become sharers in the Ruach HaKodesh, and tasted the goodness of God's Word and the powers of the 'olam haba [this age] — and then have fallen away — it is impossible to renew them so that they turn from their sin, as long as for themselves they keep executing the Son of God on the stake all over again and keep holding him up to public contempt." ~ Hebrews 6:4-6

This passage appeared to confirm my understanding that a *born-again, spirit-filled* Believer could indeed apostatize. So, off to my electric library I went. One of the resources I read was **"Understanding Assurance and Salvation"** by Robert E. Picirilli.¹ I will be quoting from this book frequently as we continue in this series. Reverencing this passage, Mr. Picirilli states:

"For those who believe in the possibility of personal apostasy, the book of Hebrews as a whole and Hebrews 6:4-6 in particular is one of the most important passages involved in providing a biblical basis for the view. The greater part of this chapter, therefore, is devoted to a thorough exegesis of this key passage in the context of the book and to treat questions about how it relates to the possibility that a truly regenerate person may 'fall from grace.'"

For those who may not be familiar with the term *exegesis* it essentially means an *"explanation or critical interpretation of a text."* You may have heard the phrase, *"you should never take a text out of context."* He goes on to state:

"One of the requirements of good exegesis is to understand how a given passage fits into its context. In this case we should consider the general thrust of Hebrews as a whole. These three verses come in the midst of a book that has perseverance for its major theme...an exhortation to preserve is at the heart of every major section of the book (Letter to the Hebrews)."

Hebrews frequently encourages the audience to endure and warns against leaving the faith (see Hebrews 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:1-29). The warning passages exhort the kehilah to remain faithful to the teachings of Yeshua. The author of Hebrews was exhorting the readers to remain faithful to the Messianic movement and not return to the Temple sacrifices and Judaism.

Does the Passage Describe Genuine Believers?

The people that the writer of Hebrews describes are said to have experienced four positive things. The question, then, depends on the meaning of these four clauses.

¹ Robert E. Picirilli, former academic dean and professor of Greek and New Testament studies at Free Will Baptist Bible College in Nashville, Tennessee, has been teaching, preaching and writing Arminian theology for more than 45 years. Since 1983, he has served as the General Editor of *The Randall House Bible Commentary* and, in that series, contributed the volumes on 1, 2 Corinthians; Ephesians; Philippians; and 1, 2 Thessalonians. His other published works include the books *Paul the Apostle*, *Book of Galatians*, *Romans*, and *A Survey of the Pauline Epistles*, as well as numerous booklets and articles in denominational publications and theological journals.

1. ***They once been enlightened.*** This seems to refer to the spiritual enlightenment we associate with salvation. The Greek verb ***phōtizō*** means to give one light or bring him into light. The very same description appears again in 10:32, where also there is no reason to doubt that the writer consciously uses it to mean conversion.
2. ***They tasted the heavenly gift.*** The people being described, "experienced" the ***heavenly gift***. Interpreters are not unanimous in identifying this ***heavenly gift***, but the disagreement is more technical than substantial. The various interpreters suggest salvation, eternal life, forgiveness of sins, the Ruach HaKodesh, or Yeshua Himself. Probably the best conclusion is that it means salvation and what goes with it: justification and eternal life in Messiah.
3. ***They become sharers in the Ruach HaKodesh.*** The word ***sharers*** in the Greek is ***metochos*** which means "to have together with," is apparently used by the writer of Hebrews exclusively to refer to Believer's common participation in things related to their salvation. In Hebrews 3:1 we are ***sharers*** of the heavenly calling; in Hebrews 3:14 ***sharers*** in the Messiah; and in 12:8 ***sharers*** of the discipline that distinguishes between true sons and bastards. Either of these three, or the one here, will by itself should be adequate to identify such a ***sharer*** as a Believer. To have the Ruach, in common with other Believers, is certainly to be a Messianic Believer. Receiving the gift of the Rauch is a regular way of stating what it means to become a Believer. (See Acts 2:38-39 and Galatians 3:14).
4. ***They tasted the goodness of God's Word and the powers of the 'olam haba.*** We meet ***tasted*** again; see above on the second clause. Those described have ***tasted*** God's Word. This means that they have experienced the goodness that God has spoken of. God has spoken good to those who put faith in Him, and these have experienced that good. The same sentiment is captured by Kefa: ***"For you have tasted that Adonai is good."*** ~ 1 Peter 2:3.

Furthermore, they have ***tasted*** the powers of the ***'olam haba***. ***Powers***, in the Greek is ***dynamis***, which can often means ***miracles*** (as in Hebrews 2:4). In its broadest sense, supernatural workings. Believers, though still living in the present age, have already begun to experience the supernatural workings characteristic of the age to come. This includes more than we need to discuss here, but regeneration and the gift of the Spirit are the initial powerful works of the age to come that all Believers have in common.

Of these four clauses as a whole, then, we conclude that one would be hard put to find a better description of genuine regeneration and conversion. Either of them will stand by itself in this respect. The four together provide one of the finest statements about salvation, from its experiential side, that appears anywhere in the Scriptures.

Does the Passage Describe Apostasy from Salvation?

The answer to this question resides in the meaning of the clause ***and then have fallen away***. There is not much dispute about the meaning of the words, most interpreters readily accept that to ***have fallen away*** as used here leaves a person outside a saving relationship with Yeshua. That is what apostasy means. In light of the contents of the entire book of Hebrews, ***fallen away*** is obviously synonymous with ***drift away*** (Hebrews 2:1), ***apostatize from the living God*** (Hebrews 3:12), ***shrinks back*** (10:38), and ***turn away from Him when He warns from heaven***. (Hebrews 12:25).

According to Mr. Picirilli, the NASB provides an especially clear and accurate translation of this passage. ***"For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame."***
 ~ Hebrews 6:4-6 (NASB)

It seems clear that the **Apostasy** of these verses is a final and irreversible. Picirilli concludes:

*"This apostasy is therefore much more serious than what most people mean by **Backsliding**. Since salvation is first and always by faith, this apostasy involves a willful defection from the saving knowledge of Christ, a final retraction of faith from Him in whom alone is provision for forgiveness of sins. The apostate forsakes the cross where he found redemption: 'By renouncing Christ they put themselves in the position of those who, deliberately refusing His claim to be the Son of God, had Him crucified and exposed to public shame.'"*

I would be remiss if I didn't include David Stern's notes on this passage for his Jewish New Testament Commentary. I have kept his formatting intact in this quote. My only change is to modify the names of the books of Scripture he references.

"These verses (4-6) have been commandeered into service of the most amazing variety of theological positions. Arminians (named after their supposed founder, Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609)) take them as proof that it is possible for someone who has once been a believer to fall away from faith irretrievably. Calvinists (after John Calvin (1509-1564)) interpret them in such a way as to make that a practical impossibility. The dispute between them has fueled many fires, but often forgotten is the author's purpose, which is not to deal abstractly with the "eternal security of the believer," but specifically with his readers' concern that unless the Levitical sacrifices required by the Five Books of Moses are offered their sins remain unforgiven. Whether they had in fact reintroduced sacrifices on their own cannot be determined from the evidence of this book. But it is obvious that they were fixated on the sacrificial system; and it becomes the author's task to show them that Yeshua's atoning death and his elevation to the office of *cohen gadol* has brought about "a transformation of *Torah*" (7:12) which alters the sacrificial system and priesthood.

Here is a review of the author's argument in these verses. He speaks of **people who have:**

1. **once been enlightened**, so that they know who Yeshua is and what he has done;
2. **tasted the heavenly gift** of God's forgiveness;
3. **become sharers in the *Ruach HaKodesh***, the Holy Spirit whom God gives only through his Son Yeshua (this terminology makes it impossible that the author is referring to pseudo-believers, because only true believers become sharers in the *Ruach HaKodesh*);
4. **tasted the goodness** (compare Psalm 34:8) **of God's Word and**
5. tasted **the powers of the *'olam haba***, which is interesting terminology for the gifts of the Holy Spirit as enumerated in 1C 12:8-10

When people who have experienced salvation in such a deep way **and then have fallen away** from faith by trusting not in Yeshua's own sacrificial death and high-priestly office but in animal sacrifices and the system of *cohanim* which the *Torah* set up to administer them—then **it is impossible to renew them so that they turn from their sin, as long as for themselves they keep on executing the Son of God on the stake all over again**. The reason is that they ignore what his death on the stake means, as proved by their trusting in animal sacrifices instead of His sacrifice. Thus they **keep holding him up to public contempt** by not glorifying his death as an atoning death but seeing it as having no special significance, so that his execution as a criminal becomes the dominant fact about it.

I am indebted to Jerome Fleischer, a Messianic Jew with a ministry in the San Francisco area, for pointing out to me that the author's purpose in these verses was not to provide fuel for the Calvinist-Arminian controversy of 1500 years later, but to turn his readers' concern away from animal sacrifices and toward the significance of Yeshua's final sacrifice (my emphasis added). This is clear from the context of the following four chapters, which deal with precisely this question and which constitute the heart of the book.

However, it is possible to make a *midrash* on these verses which does deal with the Calvinist-Arminian controversy. Calvinism teaches the eternal security of the believer. It is possible to define "believer" tautologically [superfluously] in such a way that no one so defined ever falls away; but then no one could be certain he is a "believer" until his life had ended. For it is manifestly possible for a person to trust the Messiah as fully as he knows how, by any imaginable subjective or objective measure of his ability to trust, and to experience subjectively all the benefits of faith, and still at some point later to fall away. If that happens, it is impossible, so long as he remains in such a state, to renew him again so that he turns from his sin. Why? Because God has given him everything he can give, yet he now refuses to accept his status as righteous with God, along with the implied responsibility of living a holy life. In vv. 7-8 these good gifts of God are compared to rain, intended to make a good crop grow; but if an evil crop comes, it is in due course burned—a reminder of the fate of the wicked on the Day of Judgment. But the New Testament's way of dealing with the security of the believer is different. Yochanan articulates it well: "The way we can be sure we know him is if we are obeying his commands" (1 Yochanan 2:3-6).

Some, insisting on the eternal security of one who has confessed the Messiah, understand this passage to say that carnal believers will be deprived of rewards (1C 3:8-15&N), or that they will spend the Millennial Age (Revelation 20:2-7) in Outer Darkness (see Matthew 22:13-14) instead of ruling with the Messiah."

In my next post, we will continue to unpack the topic of **Apostasy** by examining other expert's thoughts on Hebrews 6:4-6. My goal is to try to provide a balanced approach between the two main positions (which I will present soon) to this issue of **Eternal Security**.