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TULIP – The Fundamentals of the Faith by which we are Saved

Sermon #9 – Apostasy and the Perseverance of the Saints

February 20, 2022

Sermon Text: Hebrews 6:4-6

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 3

T – total depravity

U – Unconditional election

L – Limited atonement

I – Irresistible grace

P – Perseverance of the Saints

Last time we saw that all of the elect, chosen by God in eternity past, will most certainly be brought safely home. Not a single one of Christ's flock can or will be lost and end in hell. We saw that unbroken chain of redemption:

Rom 8:28-30 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (29) For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (30) And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

But are there not scriptures that would seem to teach that in fact a Christian can become an “apostate.” An apostate is a person who once professed Christ but at some point fully and finally rejects that profession and is lost? For example:

2Pe 2:19-22 They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever

overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved. (20) For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. (21) For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. (22) What the true proverb says has happened to them: “The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.”

Or, apparently likewise:

Gal 5:4 You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

We know however from our previous study of Scripture that the Bible teaches that salvation is of the Lord and that once, out of His own good pleasure, He elects His

people to salvation, that salvation will be carried through to the end. Nothing can ever separate the Christian from Christ. What then do passages like these teach? How are we to understand the apostate?

This subject is of no small importance. There are Christians who worry that they have committed the unpardonable sin – though they don’t know what it is. In church history this issue has caused great turmoil. There was once what is called the Novatian Controversy. The New World Encyclopedia explains:

Novatianism was a teaching originating in the third century AD., based on the teachings of the antipope Novatian, who was elected in opposition to the more lenient policy of Pope Cornelius (251-253) regarding the forgiveness of apostate Christians who had been willing to commit the sin of idolatry under persecution.

Novatian and his crowd pointed particularly to the Scripture we are

going to be looking at this morning – Hebrews 6:4-6 – and concluded that Christians who recanted their faith in times of persecution and worshipped the emperor to avoid being persecuted or martyred were guilty of a final, unforgiveable sin which prevented them from being accepted back into full fellowship in the church.

Our question this morning is not whether or not a person who *claims to be a Christian* can renounce that claim and end in hell. We know that many such people have and do exist. But what we want to find an answer to is the question – *is it possible for a person to be actually born again, to be in Christ, and then due to some sin be cut off, rejected, and end in hell?* Arminian Christianity would answer – “yes.” We reply, no – such a thing is impossible.

Let’s look then at this passage in Hebrews which on the face of it – according to the “theology of the first glance,” as R.C. Sproul used to say – seems to teach that a really regenerate person can fall away, apostatize, and be lost forever.

Heb 6:4-8 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.

(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.

As a reminder, you will recall that we have already stated that this doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints (or, Eternal Security), does

NOT mean that people who profess Christ but who walk in sin without repentance are nevertheless secure in salvation. In fact perseverance means and includes perseverance in *faith and obedience* to Christ.

To help us understand what the Apostle to the Hebrews means here in chapter 6, we are going to call on John Owen who wrote extensively on these verses. Let me tell you a bit about him, taking this information from *Meet the Puritans* by Beeke and Pederson-

Owen lived in England from 1616 to 1683. He did not belong to the church of England but was a Congregationalist and a Calvinist. Beginning particularly at the age of 26, he wrote for 41 years and produced over 80 works. Owen was familiar with suffering. He married Mary Rooke and they had 11 children, only one of whom survived to adulthood. She had an unhappy marriage, returned to live with her parents, and died of consumption a short time later.

Over 1,000 people came each week to hear his sermons, but Owen was

frequently saddened by what he considered the small fruit of his work. He was invited to preach to Parliament several times including on the day following the execution of King Charles 1. Oliver Cromwell was impressed and invited Owen to come with him to Ireland as chaplain. Owen did so, traveling with 12,000 Psalm-singing Puritan soldiers to Ireland. Ultimately Owen urged Parliament to show mercy to the Irish. \

Owen ultimately fell out of favor with Cromwell when Owen opposed Cromwell becoming king. In 1660 he retired to a small estate, every position of influence having been taken from him. He suffered much from asthma and gallstones but kept writing and peaching as he could. The day before his death he wrote to a friend, "I am going to Him whom my soul has loved, or rather who has loved me with an everlasting love – which is the whole ground of my consolation....I am leaving the ship of the church in a storm; but while the great Pilot is in it, the loss of a poor under-rower will be inconsiderable. Live, and pray, and

hope, and wait patiently, and do not despond; the promise stands invincible, that He will never leave us nor forsake us.” [Meet the Puritans, Joel Beeke & Randall Pederson, Reformation Heritage Books, 2006].

In volume 7 of the Banner of Truth publication of his Works, Owen specifically deals with this subject of apostasy and he does so by giving a very close examination of our text – Hebrews 6:4-7. [Owen wrote a commentary on Hebrews as well which fills 7 weighty volumes]. He is not extremely easy to read, so I am going to give you a summary of his main points. They are excellent. Quotations here will be taken from The Works of John Owen, Vol 7, Banner of Truth.

Owen saw that there was a great evil among the professing Christian church in his day. Specifically, a falling away from the true gospel, particularly as seen in the false teachings of Rome. He recognized that this deterioration of truth is a threat to every age:

“No instance can be given of any church or nation in the world, which ever received the profession of the gospel, and did not, sooner or later, either totally or in some considerable degree, fall off from the doctrine which it reveals and the obedience which it requires....I set myself to a general inquiry what might be the secret causes and reasons why it is that all sorts of persons, in all ages, have been so prone to apostatize from the sincere profession of the gospel in faith and obedience.”

Let’s look at the text again:

Heb 6:4-6 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.

As you can see, it is easy for people to assume that a person who is described in these terms:

- Has been enlightened
- Tasted the heavenly gift
- Shared in the Holy Spirit
- Tasted the goodness of the Word of God
-(tasted) the powers of the age to come

...to assume that surely such a person described is a Christian. Genuinely. In Christ. Regenerate. And that thus this Scripture is teaching that the Christian “may totally and finally fall from grace and perish eternally.” Nevertheless, as John Owen cautions:

“And usually it does happen, very unhappily, with men who think they clearly see some peculiar opinion or persuasion in some singular text of Scripture, and will not bring their interpretation of it under the analogy of faith, wherein they might see how contrary it is to the whole design and current of the Word in other places.”

NOTE: By the “analogy of faith” Owen means the agreement of all parts of Scripture. You have it stated in the Confession of Faith:

“The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture, it must be searched by other places that speak more clearly.” (LCF, Ch 1)

Luk 24:27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.
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Therefore, we know that the Bible is not going to teach the perseverance of the saints in one place and contradict itself in another. God’s Word is always in agreement. What then does the Apostle mean here?

Listen to Owen again as he shows us how vital it is for us to properly understand these verses:

“There have been assorted mistakes in the practical application of the intention of these words, mistakes usually made in the consciences of men who, by reason of some sin, have suffered with terrors and troubles of conscience and who have supposed themselves to be fallen into the condition described here by the apostle and consequently be lost forever without remedy.”

Alright then, let’s move to the text itself and begin by looking at that very first small yet important word – “for...”.

Heb 6:4 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,

Little words are often BIG in importance and so it is here. What does “for” tell us? *It tells us that what the Apostle is about to say here is a result of what he has said before.* Therefore, it is a great error to simply press on ahead without looking back. And so –

Heb 5:11-14 About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. (12) For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, (13) for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. (14) But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

We see then that there was a very serious problem among these Hebrews. They had become “dull of hearing” so much so that they were difficult to teach. They had professed Christ some time before – long enough before that they should actually have matured sufficiently in Christ to be teaching others themselves.

In fact not only had they not matured in Christ, they had

regressed! They needed review on the basics once again! They were like babies who insisted on their bottle, refusing solid food. So rusty had they become that they could not use the Word of Righteousness to theirs or anyone else's benefit.

I remember once when I was a kid I had taken piano lessons, but my heart wasn't in it and eventually I neglected practicing. Ultimately I could no longer play pieces that I once had been proficient at.

And so it was with these Hebrews. They had lazily neglected the means of grace such as careful hearing of God's Word and now they were foggy even on the ABC's of the faith. They should have been very far down the road in following Christ by now, but *they could not even discern good from evil!*

And THIS – we come now to the main point – THIS is a very, very dangerous state to be in. I don't think I need tell you that many, many people today who once professed Christ and perhaps even eagerly listened to Christ's Word,

have grown lazy and neglectful. They neglect their Bible, they neglect the Lord's Day, they neglect prayer and the hearing of the Word...and they drift into danger like a ship near the rocks.

There are simple and vital disciplines in most areas of life, some of which are matters of life and death. For example, when you launch a boat into the ocean, there is a checklist that needs careful attention. One item on that list, for instance (like being sure the bilge plug is in!) is to be certain that the bow rope is secured inside the boat and not left somewhere that it might fall overboard un-noticed. If it does, and if it is long enough to reach to the back of the boat where the prop is, then it will entangle in the prop and kill the motor. And if you happen to be near the jetty rocks with waves crashing onto them, you might just end up crashing there yourself before you can get the prop free and the motor running again.

Well, many people have, as Scripture says, made shipwreck of their faith. And most often this

disaster is the result of just what these Hebrews had been doing – lazily neglecting the meat of God’s Word, choosing to remain in spiritual diapers and thereby being a sitting duck for about any wolf that comes along. And this is the peril which the Apostle here is warning these Hebrews about.

Heb 6:1-8 Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, (2) and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. (3) And this we will do if God permits.

(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.

(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.

As you can see, it is going to require more time than we have today to properly examine and understand this text. But you can see even now that the Apostle’s purpose is to demonstrate to the Hebrews and to us...well, listen to Owen tell it:

“Whereas he had shown that they were slow as to the making of progress...he lets them know the danger that there was in continuing in that slothful condition; for not to proceed in the ways of the gospel and obedience to Christ is an entrance into a total relinquishment of both. So that they might be acquainted with the danger of it and be stirred up to

avoid that danger, he gives them an account of the miserable condition of those who end in apostasy.”

These warnings are vitally necessary for us as well. Because as we are going to see, the persons the Apostle is concerned to show us – the persons who end in a condition in which no repentance is possible, persons who have actually been recipients of multiple and powerful workings of the Holy Spirit upon them – nevertheless were never born again, who fall away from Christ, and who end in hell for all eternity. This is the warning we are given here.

declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, (3) how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?...

Heb 6:7-8 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.

Heb 2:1-3 Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. (2) For since the message