

KEEP FAITHFUL AND CARRY ON

SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

Hebrews 6:4-8

14th Message

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Today is the first Sunday of Lent. This is a forty-day season in remembrance of the forty days that Jesus fasted in the wilderness. At the end of the forty days, when he was hungry, Satan tempted or tested him three times. Each time Jesus resisted the temptation and he passed the test. How did he do so? He remained faithful by remembering what God had spoken. He repulsed Satan each time by faithfully quoting what God had spoken in the Book of Deuteronomy. He remained faithful to God and his word, where previously both Adam and Israel had failed to do so. They were unfaithful and disobedient. Today, if *you* hear his voice, do not harden *your* heart! Don't be like them. Follow the example of Jesus. Keep faithful and carry on.

Tuesday was a day of wild partying: Mardi Gras in New Orleans, Carnival in Rio. It was a day of excess and consumption. In England, by contrast, the usual Shrove Tuesday pancake races were held. The next day was Valentine's Day, a celebration of love. But it was also Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent.

All over the world people gathered for Ash Wednesday services. Worshipers came forward to have ashes smeared on their foreheads in the form of a cross, to remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return. People recited Psalm 51:

**Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions. (Ps 51:1 NIV)**

Church choirs sang Allegri's beautiful setting of this psalm, the *Miserere*. Have mercy. Congregants recited the Collect for Ash Wednesday:

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made, and you forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins . . . , may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

At Lent we remember that we are "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love," as the hymn says. Despite us being dust, God desires relationship with us. This is why David could write Psalm 51. Convicted of his grievous sins, he sought the Lord, looking for mercy and forgiveness. Like David, we believe God's promise through Jeremiah: "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jer 29:13). God wants to be found by us. He delights to show mercy. But what if we stop looking for him? What if we turn our back on him? What if we stop being faithful?

We return today to the Book of Hebrews after a break of nearly six months. We come to the most controversial sentence in the entire book, indeed perhaps the most controversial sentence in the entire NT.

Anyone who preaches or teaches Hebrews will inevitably be asked two main questions. First, who wrote the Book of Hebrews? That is the easy question with an easy answer: we don't know, but it wasn't

Paul. Perhaps it was Apollos, or someone like him.

The second question is much more difficult: "What about Hebrews 6:4?" Some ask out of genuine curiosity. Some ask because they want to pigeon hole you, to know which theological box to put you in. Some of you have asked me this question, so I know that there are some here who have been anticipating today's sermon for a while. You're wondering how I will handle this difficult text; where I will land. But many of you, I'm sure, don't know what I'm talking about. What is the big deal deal with Hebrews 6, you wonder.

What is this sentence that is so controversial? Here it is, though NIV breaks it into two:

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 and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. (Heb 6:4-6 NIV)

Here be dragons! This is the third of five so-called "warning passages" in Hebrews. It is by far the most difficult and the most controversial. It raises a host of questions. Is it possible for someone to lose their salvation? Are the people described in vv. 4-5 really "saved" or not? Is there really no way back? Many people bring to this text their theological framework. On one side, Calvinists say that since it is impossible to lose your salvation, the people in vv. 4-5 were not really "saved"; they only seemed to be so. On the other side, Arminians say that they were "saved," because it is possible to lose your salvation. At stake are the doctrines of eternal security and perseverance of the saints. I am not interested in approaching the text this way, from either side. So I may already disappoint some of you.

What I do want to do is see how this troubling sentence reads on its own, and then how it fits within the flow of the whole book, and particularly within the flow of the surrounding verses. This will be more faithful to the author's intention and, I think, be more beneficial for us. This sentence flows out of the previous paragraph. Unfortunately NIV, uniquely among the major translations, and to me inexplicably, omits a "for" with which the sentence begins (and another one at v. 7). The section 5:11-6:12 forms a tight unit. I had originally intended that we hear these 16 verses as three consecutive sermons. But changes to the preaching schedule mean that there has been a nearly-six month gap since the first sermon (5:11-6:3). I will seek to bridge that gap later in this sermon.

The sentence properly begins, "For it is impossible." But before the preacher tells us what is impossible, he describes at length those for whom this is impossible. He gives five descriptions of these people. The first four are positive. These certainly seem to describe recipients of God's grace. I hope that they describe us.

The first description is "those who have once been enlightened." Light and darkness is a frequent metaphor pair in Scripture. We take

light for granted, but this metaphor would have been especially meaningful in societies living without electric light. Indeed, the early church had a hymn, sung at the lighting of lamps in the evening: *Phos hilaron*, “Joyous light.” God, who dwells in infinite light has shone his light on us.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

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 God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ. (2 Cor 4:6)

To the Ephesians he wrote,

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. (Eph 1:18-19)

God has already enlightened us, but Paul prays for yet more enlightenment. In both cases enlightenment leads to knowledge of God, and in particular, of what God has done in Christ. It is God himself who enlightens us, through his Spirit. When he does so it is like we pass from darkness to light, from night to day, from old to new, from death to life. This is exactly what it felt like for me 46 years ago, just after I turned 18. My physical sight had not changed, but now I could see. Now God was real to me, and I was filled with a passion to know him more. Now I could see Jesus, who is the radiance of God’s glory and the Light of the world. It really felt like I passed from darkness to light. This enlightenment is the first stage of the Christian journey. It takes a divine act so that we can see and know.

Secondly, these people are those “*who have tasted the heavenly gift.*” The gift comes from heaven, from God. Out of his generosity and love, he gives us numerous gifts. The gift of paying attention to us, and showing us favor. The gift of looking on us with kindness and love. The gift of showing us mercy and grace: withholding what we deserve, and giving us what we don’t deserve. It is a heavenly gift not simply because that is where God is. But also it is a gift of heaven itself. God gives us a foretaste of heaven, of the realm where he is in all his glory.

God gifts us because he wants a relationship with us. He initiates. A gift expects a response. We respond to his initiative by receiving his gift. We don’t simply sample it, nibbling at the edges. “Tasted” here implies fully experiencing the gift. Our reception and embrace of his gift confirm the relationship. A relationship requires nurturing and two-way communication. It requires reciprocity. We cannot possibly give on the same level as God. It is an unbalanced reciprocity. But we can give. We respond in gratitude and praise. David prayed, “Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise” (Ps 51:15). We respond in loyalty and service. We respond in faithfulness and obedience. God gives himself to us. We respond by giving ourselves to God. He is our benefactor, our patron. We sing his praises.

Thirdly, these people are those “*who have shared in the Holy Spirit.*” The verb here is actually passive: those “who have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit.” Again, God is the implicit subject here: he makes us partakers. The preacher has already used this word “partakers” twice in chapter 3. We are “partakers of the heavenly calling” (3:1) and have become “partakers of Christ” (3:14). We actually participate in Christ. We participate in his death and resurrection, symbolized in baptism. We die to our old self and live to our new self. We participate in Christ’s new resurrection life in the age to

come, experienced right now in this age. This participation is through the Holy Spirit, God’s empowering presence in us.

Fourthly, these people are those “*who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age.*” Again the word “tasted” does not mean merely sampled, nibbled around the edges, but fully experienced. We have experienced the goodness of God’s word, or, better, God’s good word. In Israel’s Scriptures, with which the preacher is thoroughly familiar, God’s good words are his promises of blessing, contrasted with his calamitous words warning of curses for infidelity and disobedience. We have already begun to experience the fulfillment of God’s promises. How so? We are already experiencing the power of the coming age right now in this present age. Christ was resurrected into the new age. When we participate in Christ we too enter into the life of the new age, experienced now. This is what eternal life means: not that we live forever, though that will be true when death is fully defeated. But that we already live right now the life of the coming age. Christ’s church is a colony of the future living now in the present. And it is a colony of heaven living here on earth.

These four descriptions certainly seem to describe those who have begun to follow Jesus. People will continue to debate whether these people were genuinely “saved” or not. In the context of Hebrews, it seems clear to me that these people had embarked well on their pilgrimage. I hope these phrases describe all of us, who have begun our journey of following Christ—our pilgrimage. If they don’t I invite you to learn more. There are opportunities to do so. We’ve just heard that next Sunday afternoon a new round of Discovery Bible Studies will commence. A little later there will be another round of Discovery Dinners on Sunday evenings. These are opportunities to learn more about Jesus and what it means to follow him.

These four wonderful positive descriptions are followed by a troubling fifth one: “*and who have fallen away.*” How can this be? How is it possible for those who have received and experienced all these good gifts to fall away? This falling away may be a deliberate act of apostasy, a decisive rejection of God and of Christ. Or it may be a gradual drifting away, imperceptible at first, but unmistakable at last. I’m reminded of the proverb: “A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest...” (Prov 24:33).

God has initiated relationship with us, in Christ and through his Spirit. But relationship requires reciprocity and cultivation. This is true for married couples. It is true for parents and children. And it is true for us and God. Inattention makes the affections grow cold. The relationship can fizzle out through neglect, just as easily as through outright rejection.

Some Christians might wrongly wonder if this is happening to them. Many Christians go through periods of discouragement, even spiritual depression. Hearts and minds do not have the joy they once had. But still you keep trying to look to Jesus, and you long for better days. You pray with David, again in Psalm 51:

**renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. (Ps 51:10-12)**

If this is your prayer, you have nothing to fear. This sentence in Hebrews is not addressed to you. God will not cast away one who looks to him, however weak the gaze, however faint the heart. He sees you. He knows your heart, your mind, your desires. He knows

that you love him, however low you feel.

But what about those who cast *God* away from *their* presence? This is what those who have fallen away have done.

Now we finally learn what is impossible for them. It is impossible to renew them unto repentance. In falling away from the path, whether by outright apostasy or gradually losing interest, they have denied the reality of God's transforming presence in their lives in Christ and through his Spirit. They have rejected his gifts and his promises. They have scorned his gift of relationship. They have given up on God, and cast him away.

The preacher spells out the implications of their actions: they have rejected Christ.

To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. (6:6b)

In rejecting God's gift they are putting Christ back on the cross, as nothing more than just another rebel killed by Rome. Crucifixion was done in public, in the most visible locations, so that all could see the pain, the horror, the shame. It was the most degrading, dehumanizing, disgraceful manner of execution. It robbed the victim of every shred of dignity and honor. It expressed the total power of the executioner and the total powerlessness of the victim. In rejecting God and Christ, those who have fallen away place themselves among the executioners and the scoffing onlookers.

Yet this was God's beloved on the cross. Jesus, in his faithful obedience to his Father, submitted himself to his Father's will. That will was to submit himself to the absolute worst that a sinful, rebellious humanity could throw at him. That rebellion included his own people; indeed, they cried the loudest for his crucifixion. Jesus absorbed it all: the rejection, the pain, the shame, the cruelty. But he remained faithful to the end, crying out, "It is finished!" He had been faithful. He had submitted to his Father. He had submitted to the cross. He had even submitted to death. But he had not submitted to evil. He did not give in to disobedience and unbelief. He did not fall away. Therein lay death's undoing, for Death had no claim on him. So God vindicated him in resurrection. Then he invited all to come to him, and be baptized in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Those who did so were filled with the Holy Spirit, God's empowering presence. They began living life in the new age ushered in by the resurrection of Jesus and his entrance into the Father's presence, taking with him the offering of his own blood which purifies from sin.

God loved the world in this way: that he sent his One-and-Only, his Best-Beloved, into this sinful, disobedient world, so that everyone who gives their allegiance to this Jesus, our risen and ascended Lord, might have now the life of the age to come. This is his great gift to us. He initiates a relationship with us in Christ, through the enabling presence of his Spirit. This gift of relationship requires appropriate reciprocity. We give back our praise and we give back our faithful obedience.

But to fall away from following Jesus is to reject all of this, and go back to Jesus on the cross as just another human being.

The preacher now gives an illustration of right and wrong reciprocity. Again, NIV omits the initial *for* which signals this as an illustration.

[For] 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. (Heb 6:7-8)

In this illustration there is one land which drinks the abundant rain from the heavens. It is sufficiently watered with the right amount of rain at the right time of year. But the land yields two different crops. Part A produces herbage, vegetation for grazing animals. This is evaluated as suitable for use. In return the land receives God's further blessing. Part B of the land produces thorns and thistles. This is evaluated as worthless. In return, a curse is imminent, and the end will be burning.

This is an evocative illustration for those familiar with Israel's Scriptures. Thorns and thistles are what the cursed ground produces after Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden (Gen 3:18). In the Song of the Vineyard, the Lord planted Israel as a vineyard on which he lavished great care. He looked for grapes, but the vineyard yielded thorns. Therefore the Lord ruined the vineyard and abandoned it to briars and thorns (Isa 5:1-7).

In this illustration of the two crops, reciprocity is expected. The land receives blessing from heaven and is expected to respond appropriately. Appropriate response brings further blessing. Inappropriate response brings curse and an end that is ultimately judgment. The implication is clear. God blesses us with his gifts, notably the gifts of relationship and of reconciliation. These gifts require our appropriate response of praise, of faithful obedience, of loyalty.

The preacher does not want his readers to repeat the experience of the wilderness generation, which he has described in detail in chapters 3-4. God brought them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea. He delivered them from the tyranny of Pharaoh who had enslaved them. The passage through the Red Sea is the great OT instance of salvation. God simultaneously saved his people and destroyed the enemy. But God's people did not immediately arrive at their destination. They had a two-fold destination. First, Mount Sinai to meet with God, for Moses had challenged Pharaoh in God's name, "Let my people go so that they may worship me." The second destination was the land flowing with milk and honey, the land of promise. The journey from Egypt to Sinai to Canaan required faith in God's promise and provision. The people grumbled and rebelled all the way. Finally, after the twelve spies brought back their report of the Land, the people rejected God and Moses. They requested new leadership that would take them back to Egypt, which they redefined as the land flowing with milk and honey. They wanted to go back to their old way of life. They sought to cast God out of their presence, out of their lives. They said their lives were better before God intervened with his grace. This is what "falling away" means here in Hebrews.

Why do we have such trouble with this sentence (Heb 6:4-6)? Perhaps we have the wrong idea of salvation. I fear that too often salvation is viewed as transactional. You say the prayer, you profess faith in Jesus. In return you get your ticket to heaven. The transaction has been completed. Debate about this controversial sentence is often transactional: has the transaction actually been made or not? Are the people of vv. 4-5, described in those four ways, really saved or not? Had the transaction been made?

But this is not how relationships work. Business relationships may be transactional; there may be a *quid pro quo*. But personal relationships are not transactional. This does not mean that they are not reciprocal. God invites us into relationship with himself. He has gone to great cost to make relationship possible. He offers us the gifts of forgiveness, reconciliation, and abundant life. He has demon-

strated his great love for us in this: that he has sent his Best-Beloved into this dark world. The world rejected that gift in the most heinous way possible. But God invites us to come to this once-crucified, now risen and exalted Jesus, and find forgiveness and shalom. Acceptance of this gift is not the end, as if the transaction be complete. It is the beginning of a journey. There is a beginning and there is an end, a goal towards which we progress.

In the previous paragraph the preacher exhorts his readers:

let us move beyond the elementary (beginning) teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity (6:1).

Literally, let us leave behind the beginning. It is not that the beginning is bad, but it is only the beginning. The beginning is good because it is all about Jesus, but there is much more ahead. Therefore, “let us press on” (NASB), or “let us be taken forward” (NIV). It is God through his Spirit who wants to take us forward towards the goal. The goal is maturity, which means to have achieved the intended final state, to have arrived at the goal. It means to complete the journey. A few verses earlier Jesus is described as having attained that state; he was “made perfect” (5:9). He was faithful and completed the journey.

An unhealthy focus on getting people “saved” can lead to a focus on whether people are simply in or out. The preacher is more concerned with whether we are moving forward or not. If we are not moving forward then we are in danger of drifting away until we have completely fallen away.

How do we ensure that we are moving forward and avoid falling away? The author describes this Book of Hebrews as a “word of exhortation” or encouragement (13:22). It is essentially a written sermon. This is why I keep referring to the author as the preacher. As exhortation and encouragement, he repeatedly offers his readers two remedies. First, he keeps pointing us to Jesus. He puts Jesus before us for our consideration. He also shows that Jesus has gone before us as our forerunner (6:20). Jesus faithfully finished the course set before him. He attained the goal (5:9). We follow him. This is why I have called this series *Christ Before Us* with both these aspects in mind. Christ before our gaze to consider, and Christ before us in the journey of faith.

Secondly, the preacher urges us to meet together to encourage one another. We do not make this journey alone. We are fellow pilgrims, encouraging one another to persevere. There is also a great cloud of

witnesses who have already gone before us and finished the course. They are watching us and cheering us on. This is chapter 11.

One of the ways we meet together is by gathering on Sunday mornings, as we are doing now. Why do we do so? In our worship guide are these words:

We gather in worship to remind ourselves who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit. Our desire is to praise God and receive afresh his Spirit in us, to affirm that we are family reconciled one to another, and to be empowered to reach out to the world.

We refresh our memory. We reset our gaze on the triune God. He has acted decisively in Christ, and continues to be at work through his Spirit. We respond to his initiative by returning our praise. We refresh our bonds with one another, our fellow pilgrims.

David prayed, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love” (Ps 51:1). And God did. Though David was guilty of high-handed, deliberate sin of the worst kind, he had a heart after God. So God was pleased to show him mercy, and to restore him.

How much more do we have access to God’s mercy. We have a faithful and merciful high priest in God’s very presence. Within the larger flow of Hebrews, this exhortation and warning (5:11–6:12) is bracketed between two invitations to draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, there to receive mercy and find grace in our time of need (4:14–16; 10:19–22).

As we make our pilgrimage there will be times of discouragement, times of suffering, times when we might be tempted to give up. But we have in God’s presence at the throne of grace our great High Priest. We can go to him. He is merciful and faithful.

We have a merciful God who delights to show us love and kindness. May God, through his Spirit in us, keep us faithful as we carry on.

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)

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