

“THE DANGER OF APOSTASY”

I. Introduction

- A. This passage contains one of the most terrifying warnings in all of Scripture.
1. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said that in his thirty-five years of ministry at his church, this was the passage that caused the most problems for people when it comes to their assurance of salvation.
 2. Lloyd-Jones wrote: “It's not that this is the hardest passage in Scripture to interpret; it's not. There are other passages that are harder to interpret than this one. It's that this passage of Scripture has had a unique power when misunderstood to unsettle the hearts of believers.”
 3. As we study this passage, we need to remember that the writer's purpose was not to unsettle Christians about their assurance.
 4. On the contrary, his purpose was to encourage believers to persevere in the faith.
 5. When we keep this in mind, we can see that God uses warnings like this as one of the means by which he preserves us and keeps us from falling.
- B. In tonight's sermon, we are going to look at this passage in three sections.
1. First, we will look at the warning that is set forth in verses 4-6.
 2. Second, we will consider how the writer illustrates that warning in verses 7-8.

3. And third, we will reflect upon the encouragement that is given in verses 9-12.

II. A Warning: Those Who Fall Away (vv. 4-6)

- A. As we look at the writer's warning, the first thing that I want us to consider is the way in which the people who fall away are described.
 1. The text says that these are people who have once been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, shared in the Holy Spirit, and tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come.
 2. The first impression that we might get when we read this description is that these are people who have experienced regeneration.
 3. The problem is that if that were the case, then this text would be saying that those who are truly regenerate can lose their salvation, an idea that stands in conflict with other passages and with the very nature of the gospel.
 4. For example, Jude 24 says that God is able to keep believers from stumbling and to present them blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy.
 5. If God is able to keep believers from falling away, then those who are described as falling away in this passage cannot be true believers.
- B. For this reason, we should not interpret verses 4 and 5 as a description of a person's inward condition but of their outward participation in the common operations of the Spirit of God.
 1. This interpretation is confirmed by the fact that the writer says in verse 9 that he is confident of better things in the case of these Christians, things that belong to salvation.

2. This implies that the things that are listed in verses 4 and 5 do not belong to salvation, at least not in and of themselves.
 3. This is further confirmed by the fact that some early Christian literature associates the word “enlightened” with a person’s baptism and the idea of tasting the heavenly gift with participation in the Lord’s Supper.
 4. Following this line of interpretation, the language of sharing in the Holy Spirit simply means being a part of the covenant community in which the Holy Spirit is at work.
 5. Tasting the goodness of the Word means listening to the preaching of the Word.
 6. And tasting the powers of the age to come means outwardly participating in the community in which the kingdom of God is breaking into this present age.
 7. When we interpret verses 4 and 5 in this way, we see that this passage is very similar to Jesus’ parable of the sower.
 8. Initially, you can’t tell the difference between the seed that is sown in the good soil and the seed that is sown in the bad soils.
 9. The difference can only be seen as time progresses.
- C. The next thing to consider about the writer’s warning is what he means when he speaks of falling away.
1. Calvin defines this as a “total defection from the gospel... when a sinner offends not God in some one thing, but entirely renounces his grace.”
 2. And John Owen says that this is “a total renunciation of all the constituent principles and doctrines of Christianity — in an avowed and professed manner.”

3. In other words, this is not talking about the sins that true believers continue to commit for as long as they live in this world.
 4. It is talking about rejecting Christ and his gospel.
 5. That is something that a genuine believer cannot do.
 6. This is made clear in 1 John 2:19, where the apostle describes antichrists in these words: "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us."
 7. True believers don't turn their backs on Jesus.
- D. Another thing that we have to consider about this warning is what the writer says about the impossibility of restoring those who fall away.
1. We find something similar to this in the Old Testament, where there were two categories of sins.
 2. On the one hand, there were unintentional sins, sins that were transgressions of God's law.
 3. Those sins could be forgiven through God's provision in the sacrificial system.
 4. On the other hand, there were also presumptuous sins, sins referred to as those done with a high hand. (see Num. 15:30-31)
 5. Those sins could not be forgiven because they displayed the person's utter rejection of God and his covenant.
 6. In the same way, there is no possibility of forgiveness for those who truly renounce Christ because they are renouncing God's gracious provision for the forgiveness of sins.
 7. Those who repudiate Christ are rejecting the only way of salvation.

8. They are acting as if they want to put Christ on the cross again.
 9. This is what the writer means when he says that “they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.”
 10. Such people are aligning themselves with those who put Jesus to death.
- E. As I said at the beginning of this sermon, the warning conveyed in this passage has shaken the assurance of many Christians.
1. There are Christians who read this and worry that perhaps they have fallen away from Christ and that it is therefore impossible for them to be restored to repentance.
 2. The thing that a person who has such worries needs to understand is that the very fact that they have these concerns is an indication that they have not rejected Christ in the sense that this passage is talking about.
 3. If they had truly fallen away, they would not be worried about it.
 4. They would be siding with those who scoffed at Jesus while he was hanging on the cross.
 5. The fact that their consciences are disturbed is an indication of the Spirit’s gracious work in their lives.
- F. We also need to understand that these verses are not saying that everyone whom we see turning his back on Jesus is irretrievably lost.
1. Not everyone who falls away from our perspective has fallen away in the sense that is being described in this verse.
 2. We know that that cannot be the case because it was not the case with Peter.

3. Remember that Jesus told Peter and the other disciples, "You will all fall away because of me this night" (Mt. 26:31), and that is exactly what happened.
 4. Peter fell away by denying the Lord three times.
 5. But Peter was restored again to repentance.
 6. And there are plenty of other examples of people who return to Christ after a period of turning away from him, sometimes a very lengthy period.
 7. This tells us that we not not need to give people up for lost when we see them turning away from Christ.
 8. We can keep praying for them to repent.
 9. The thing that we have to keep in mind as we think about this is that we cannot see into a person's heart.
 10. We cannot know for certain if they are truly renouncing Christ in the sense that this passage is talking about, even if their words and actions suggest that they are.
- G. We do not need to have our assurance shaken by this warning, but we do need to heed it.
1. To fail to do so would be like failing to heed a traffic sign that says "Slow Down, Sharp Curve Ahead."
 2. The writer of Hebrews talks about the danger of apostasy because he wants to put believers on guard.
 3. Don't toy with sin.
 4. Don't put off repenting when you do sin.
 5. Don't let yourself take Jesus and his gospel for granted.

6. If you continually cherish Christ and cling to him as your righteous advocate with the Father, you will never be in danger of holding him up to contempt.

III. An Illustration: Two Kinds of Land (vv. 7-8)

- A. We turn now to the metaphor that the writer gives in verses 7 and 8 to illustrate the warning given in verses 4-6.
 1. Listen to verses 7-8 again: "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. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned."
 2. This metaphor talks about two different kinds of land that nevertheless hold one thing in common.
 3. The thing that they have in common is that both of them have drunk the rain that has fallen on them.
 4. Both have been well watered.
 5. Both should produce fruit.
- B. Notice how this fits in with what was described in verses 4 and 5.
 1. Those who participate in the outward operations of the Spirit in the context of the visible church are receiving the nourishment that the Lord provides for spiritual life and growth.
 2. Such people should produce spiritual fruit.
 3. But this does not happen with everyone who outwardly participates in the life of the church.
 4. Some produce the fruit of persevering faith and the obedience that flows from such faith.

5. Those people receive the blessing that is promised in the gospel.
6. But other people produce thorns and thistles, and they fall under God's curse.
7. Jesus used a similar metaphor in John 15 when he said this: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." (Jn. 15:1-6)
8. Both that passage and this one in Hebrews point out that it is unnatural for things that receive good nourishment to be unfruitful.
9. Apostasy is unnatural.
10. The person who truly falls away from Jesus is rejecting the One whom he once believed to be the only way to life.
11. This is why his end is the same as that of the branch that bears no fruit: broken off, thrown away, and burned.

IV. An Encouragement: Things that Belong to Salvation (vv. 9-12)

- A. This brings us to the third part of our passage, verses 9-12, where the writer speaks a word of encouragement to the Hebrew Christians.
 1. While he has just given them this serious warning about the danger of falling away, he assures them that he doesn't think that they are apostates.

2. He can say this with confidence because he sees fruit in their lives.
 3. He sees things in their lives that are “better” than the things mentioned in verses 4 and 5.
 4. These things are better because they are the fruit of the gospel, not merely the means by which the blessings of the gospel are delivered to us.
 5. Of course, those means of grace are not to be neglected, but they are not efficacious in and of themselves.
 6. Some who receive them do not produce any fruit.
 7. But that was not the case with these Hebrew Christians.
 8. Their lives exhibited the things that belong to salvation.
- B. The writer continues with his word of encouragement by assuring these believers that God is not unjust to overlook their good works.
1. This does not mean that their works are meritorious.
 2. The writer is not saying that these Christians had done something that put God in their debt.
 3. There is nothing that we can do to merit God’s favor, and that remains the case even after we are born again.
 4. The reason why the writer can say that it would be unjust for God to overlook their love for and service to the saints is because these things are the evidence of God’s work in them.
 5. God is not a debtor to any man, but there is a sense in which he is a debtor to himself.
 6. He keeps his promises.

7. He finishes the good work that he begins in the lives of the elect.
 8. He causes our lives to bear fruit.
 9. And he gives us the reward that he has graciously promised to give us, not because we have earned the reward but because he will never go back on his word.
- C. We should take note of the fact that the work to which the writer points as evidence of God's gracious work in the lives of these Christians is their love for and service to the saints.
1. This is a distinguishing mark of every Christian.
 2. Christians care about God's people and do what they can to care for them because they belong to the Lord.
 3. Of course, we should do good to all people, but we should have a special concern for our fellow believers.
 4. As Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, "as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." (Gal. 6:10)
 5. And as Jesus said in his teaching about the sheep and the goats, when we serve his people there is a sense in which we are serving him. (see Mt. 25:40)
- D. The last two verses of our passage make it clear that the purpose of this text is not to shake our sense of assurance but to make sure that we have full assurance of hope until the end.
1. Assurance of salvation is not something that can only be obtained by a special class of Christians.
 2. Every Christian should strive to have assurance.

3. And the way to obtain it is by persevering in faith and producing the fruits of faith.
 4. Make sure that you are not sluggish or lazy in your faith.
 5. Be diligent and fruitful.
- E. Lastly, notice that the writer says that the way to inherit the things that God has promised in the gospel is through faith and patience.
1. Faith and patience go hand-in-hand in the Christian life.
 2. The Christian life is not a sprint but a marathon.
 3. It is not a restless quest for the next big thing but a life that is characterized by patiently holding fast to the hope set before us.
 4. May God, who is able to keep us from stumbling, grant us this faith and patience.