

# Doing the Impossible

*Hebrews*

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**Bible Text:** Hebrews 6:4-12; 2 Corinthians 13:5  
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Let us take our Bibles and turn together to Hebrews 6. While you're looking that up, I bring with me greetings from Trinity Central Church in the center of Oahu in Hawaii where I was preaching last Sunday morning, and from Honolulu Bible Church where I was preaching in the evening. I had the joy of being able to be a part of the first of two, the first and second of two conferences with Banner of Truth in Hawaii, one for ministers last Wednesday and then Friday, Saturday for general members of churches, and those were great encouragements. Then we went to visit Bill and Adela Walters who used to be members of the church here, in fact, I think Adela is still a member. So basically I was working the whole time. I was. There was no surfing that took place. Nothing ungodly at all. Hard work from beginning to end but it was a great experience to be there. The Walters send their greetings as well to those who remember them.

Well, let's hear the word then from Hebrews 6. We'll start at verse 1. We studied verse 1 to 3 last week, or two weeks ago, but we'll pick up here.

1 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. 9 Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things--things that belong to salvation. 10 For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. 11 And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full

assurance of hope until the end, 12 so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Years ago after my first church in Ireland, we left Britain to come to North America and have our church in Canada, and when we arrived in Canada, we very soon became aware of a popular media figure. Often interviewed on talk shows, he talked on a range of subjects but he was particularly caustic in his attack on Christians. His name rang a bell. I looked it up in a biography I had of Billy Graham and discovered that he had once been a friend of Billy Graham's, in fact, he had been a far more effective and successful preacher at the beginning of Billy Graham's career until it all started to go south. First he began to question the authority of the Bible. Then he began to question the central elements of the Christian message. Finally he rejected the whole Christian thing and became an ardent opponent of Christian people and Christian things.

As we come to that case in our minds, we come to this passage today and to understand what's being said here, I want you to imagine a region between two countries, if you will. There's a border, the border's invisible. There isn't a wall, a huge wall, a beautiful wall. There's no obvious sign of the border. It's a porous border and there are people on both sides of the border and if you were helicoptering over this imaginary place and you looked at the people living on both sides of the border, you would think that they were the same people: they wore the same clothes, they seemed to have the same manners, the same approach to life, the same standard of living and so on. You would imagine looking at them that they were one and the same; that they shared the same reality. I use that as an illustration because I think that there is such a border, such an invisible wall that separates those who are in Christ from those who are outside of Christ; those who have come to the light and those who are still in the darkness; those who whose citizenship is in heaven and those who are of the world; and close to the border there are people living who seem apparently to belong to Christ who, it turns out, don't really belong to Christ.

This is what the author has in mind here. If you look at the plus side of the border, you look at the people who are living very very very close to the border on the Christian side, if you will, then you find people like the people described in the previous section of this passage, people who have become immature. They once were mature; they were once walking with God; they were progressing in the things of God; they were developing in the things of God; and now they are regressing spiritually, for whatever reason they are regressing spiritually. They've gone back to the very beginning elements. What they want is the Gospel, the simple Gospel, the things that they were saved with, the things that they were taught when they first believed. They're going back again and again and again to the elementary doctrine. They're going as near to the wall, as near to the border where they entered as they can go and the answer for those people according to the author of Hebrews is what they need is not to be taught again the A, B, C's of the Christian faith, what they need at that point is to be handed a systematic theology and told to go deeper. Go back, go deeper into the faith. Dig into the faith. Discover its riches and that will refresh your soul. That will bring you out of the doldrums. That will reestablish you in the joy of the Lord and you will begin to grow again.

That's good advice, by the way. It's good advice when you teenagers who have been in the church all their lives get a bit bored and fed up with what they've learned. The answer is not to keep harping on about the A, B, C's, they know them, the answer is hand them a systematic theology; figuratively speaking, get them deeper and show them that the deeper you go, the more consistent, robust and believable the Christian faith really is. That was a free message. Back to our passage for today.

These people, the people on the plus side of the wall, they are regressing but now he describes people who are on the other side of the wall but don't know it, that we think are on the same side as we are, that are sitting with us in church today, and these people are in danger of falling back, falling away. There have been, I think, about three different approaches to this word "falling away" or "apostasy," which is another word that means "to fall away," one is that what the writer is doing here is raising a hypothetical case, it's kind of a straw man and he's warning against something that is actually quite impossible to happen. Another is that he is describing something that is possible for a believer, that it's possible for a believer to fall from grace. This is our friends, the Wesleyans' view that it is possible to fall out of grace and then be restored into grace, and the Wesleyans are our friends, we sing Wesleyan hymns funnily enough, and they believe a lot of the Gospel that we believe so they're good brothers and sisters in Christ, but you notice in this passage that it says that it is impossible to restore these people. Then there's the third view that what is happening here is that the writer is describing people who have apparently come to Christ. To all intents and purposes, for all you know and can observe, they are believers.

Now look at what he says. First of all, he describes a definite experience. These people have a definite experience. Look at how he describes it here in verse 4, these people were once enlightened. The church fathers related this idea of being enlightened to baptism because in their mind, you see, if you were an adult and you'd come to faith, you were taken through a year's Catechism lessons, taught the Bible, taught what the church believes, and then at the end of that period you were baptized into the church. If you were baptized as an infant, then that initiated a whole lifetime, really, from infancy of being instructed in the Christian faith. So when they said that this enlightenment related to baptism, they were thinking of the instruction that goes with baptism and I think we should just underline the fact that what he has in mind here are people who've been exposed to the Gospel message, people who've come to understand it. William Gouge, the Puritan, says these people have even had a stirring of the Holy Spirit; it's not a stirring that leads to being born again but it's a stirring that leads to understanding. They've begun to grasp something of the Christian message.

Secondly, he says these people have tasted the heavenly gift. That's obviously the gift that's offered in the Gospel of Christ. They've had a taste of it. John Owen in his commentary distinguishes tasting something from being nourished by something. You know what it's like if you go to Costco or Wegmans and Costco is far better. You go around and it's one of those times when they're giving you little morsels of some delicacy and you go and you get one, and I have a technique, I do this loop whereby I can manage to get breakfast or lunch or whatever it is by just looping round and round. But the idea is

you take one of these little morsels and you hear people, they take it and while they're still within earshot to the person that has given it to them they say, "Oh, how delicious! Marvelous! This great! We should get this! This is really fantastic!" And then off they go and they don't get it. I mean, you've done that yourself. I've done it many times myself. This is the kind of people that have been described here, they've tasted the heavenly gift but they've never bought into it, never been nourished by it, it's never gone beyond that. They've tasted enough to be impressed with the Gospel, impressed with Christ, without ever being brought to Christ.

Thirdly, he talks about people and they've been partakers of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the proper name for that one who with the Father and the Son constitutes the Triune Majesty of God. We think of the Holy Spirit and we think, what do we think of? Do we think of virtues? There are virtues the Holy Spirit cultivates in people. The Holy Spirit generally in people, even non-Christian people, even unbelieving people, the Holy Spirit restrains them from sinning, doesn't he? So we could be thinking of the virtues that the Holy Spirit brings about in people simply by restraining them from sin. Or when we think about the Holy Spirit, what else do we think about? We think about spiritual gifts. Is it possible to have the gifts of the Spirit without having the Spirit? Well, yes, it is. You think of people like Baalim in the Old Testament prophesying and yet Baalim did not know God. Baalim did not know the God of Israel. You think of King Saul. King Saul had gifts, he prophesied, he led Israel, and yet King Saul did not have a right relationship with God. You think of Judas Iscariot. He went out with the others when they went on their mission trips. He healed people and he cured people and he cast out demons and he did all of these miraculous things but he did it without having the Spirit of God. And you remember Jesus teaching, talking about the last day that's coming he says, "Many will come to me on that day and they will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not drive out demons in your name? Did we not prophesy in your name and perform many miracles in your name?'" And Jesus says, "I will tell them plainly, 'I do not know you.'"

It's very easy, you see, for us to think that spiritual gifts and giftedness is an indicator of spiritual life and reality. You remember when the apostles came back from one of their mission trips to Jesus, they were so excited. They were falling over each other to get to Jesus and to express to Jesus how excited they were but the fact, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name," and Jesus says to them, do you remember what he said? "I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and overcome all the power of the enemy, nothing will harm you, however, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Jesus knows, you see, that it's possible for someone to confuse gifts and ministry with saving grace in their lives.

He talks about these people, they've also, next, tasted the goodness of the word of God. Again, you have this idea of tasting something but it not nourishing them. They've tasted enough that they've rejoiced in what they've tasted. They've been impressed by what they've tasted. They're like the people that Jesus describes when he describes the word of God as a seed that falls on rocky places and these people hear the word and receive it with joy but since it has no root in them, they last only a short time, and when trouble or

persecution comes because of the word, they fall away, they apostatize. These people had tasted the powers of the age to come.

In Hebrews as in all of the New Testament, the age to come arrived with the coming of Jesus, "in these last days, God has spoken to us by a Son," and in these last days Jesus is drawing people into what the last days represent. People thought about the last days, as we still do, as the day when there will be final judgment and final resurrection from the dead of the body, but some of that has already happened. There was a judgment on the cross. On the cross, Christ suffered the judgment of God against the sins of his people so that they will not come into judgment on that last day, and by his death and resurrection, Christian people today enter into resurrection life by being born again of the Spirit of God, receiving new life by the Spirit in Christ as a kind of Stage I of that resurrection that will be concluded at Stage II when our bodies are raised from the dead as well. These people had belonged to the assembly of those that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 10 as those on whom the ends of the ages had come. These people he's describing walked among the people, the company of people for whom the last age had already dawned through their commitment to Christ. So, you see, these people apparently were Christians to all intents and purposes. They looked like it, perhaps even thought they were themselves, they are convinced that they were Christians as well so there's a definite experience here and there's a deliberate rejection here because when they fall away it's impossible to have them restored.

What is this falling away? Well, I think this falling away is their departing entirely and forever, both of those words, entirely and forever from their profession of Christ. They're abandoning entirely and forever the way of Christ and Christ himself. He is not here describing someone, maybe you this morning, who comes or becomes discouraged and disillusioned about their faith. He's not describing here someone who temporarily falls into sin, even remains in it for a little while. He's not talking about someone who has become cold in their love for the Lord and lost interest in their faith for a little while. He is talking about someone now who is aggressively anti-Christian. Look at how publicly rebellious they are. Look at the tenses of the verbs that are used here. These people keep on crucifying the Son of God. They keep on putting him to contempt, holding him up to contempt. These people have not only repudiated Christ, they hate Christ. They mock Christ. They're utterly opposed to Christ. So, therefore, he goes on to say it is impossible to keep leading them, present tense again, keep leading them again to repentance. Their spiritual hardening has led to permanent deadness.

Now let me pause there. Whenever we come across a passage like this, we need to keep a principle in our minds, a principle that's good for studying the Bible all the way through and it's this, it's very very technical and theological so you'll struggle with it. We are to keep the plain things the main things and the main things the plain things. Can you remember that? Plain/main. Main/plain. Those things, this is very important.

So let me tell you the plain things that are the main things. The Bible is very clear that God elects people to salvation. He chose us before we choose him. That's the reality. God gives his Holy Spirit so that those who are led by the Spirit are the children of God and

he encourages us to call God, Abba Father, and the Bible teaches as plain as the nose on your face that those who are elected will never fall finally and forever away from the grace of God. In fact, they're kept in the hand of the Father and they're kept in the hand of the Son, they're kept together guarded by the power of God so that they will never fall away and perish. That's the plain thing and the main thing, but here's also a plain thing: in the Bible there are these warnings that flag up the danger of apostasy. When we use this word "apostasy, falling away," we do not mean a true believer in the Lord Jesus is capable of losing their salvation and yet falling away is spoken about here in very strong terms. There has to be some substantive content to this expression if we're going to take this passage seriously. This is not just a phantom warning. He's not talking about someone doing something that's utterly impossible, there would be no warning involved. No, he's talking about someone who's sitting in church today who has made an outward credible profession of faith in Christ and who down the road might repudiate Christ finally and forever.

There is such a thing as a false profession and because there is such a thing as false profession, it's incumbent on all of us that we examine ourselves. We're told to do that when we come to the Lord's Table, examine yourself. We are told to make our calling and election sure. There is a place for self-examination. Now this self-examination is necessary because ultimately apostasy is only recognized when people leave us. That is recognized by us when people leave us. When John is writing in 1 John 2, he writes to people, he says, "Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, even now already many antichrists have arisen. From this we know that it's the last hour. They went out from us but they were not really of us, for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us, but they went out in order that it might be shown that they are not all of us." Do you see what the writer is saying? You will not know right now who is an apostate, you will not know until they leave us and repudiate Christ.

That's what John is warning about to that congregation there in 1 John 2. They apostatized and it was by their apostatizing we learned that they were never really of us. Up until then we thought they were. Up to them we would have voted them into the eldership. Up until then we might have had them as a deacon. Up to then they might have been teaching Sunday school class. Up to then they might have been regarded as one of the important people of our church. Then they left us and we realized there was no real spiritual reality in them. They appeared to be believers. Apostasy does not mean losing your salvation, it means abandoning your profession of faith altogether. It is impossible to lose your salvation but it is not impossible for a person in that shadow-lands where the border is, it is not impossible for that person to abandon their profession of faith, therefore, we need to examine ourselves.

Now in talking about examining ourselves, I need to distinguish between self-examination and introspection. Some believers, maybe you are one of them, have a melancholic temperament. I prefer to use that older word. We tend to use the word "depressive" of all kinds of things. I think we should save "depression" for clinical depression, someone with clinical depression has a medical situation for which they need the help of a medical doctor and they need to go see a medical doctor. It is not a failure

on your part, there is not something wrong with you as a Christian if you have the medical issue of clinical depression. You need the help that can be given to you by modern medicine, please do go and see a medical doctor in that case. But there are others of us who have a melancholic temperament, we are prone to be down, and people in that category can very easily lock onto the language of the unpardonable sin, or lock onto the language of falling away, or lock onto this idea of antichrist, and they become introspective and they become even more melancholic.

Now Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones who was both a physician, one of the greatest in the United Kingdom in his day, as well as a physician of souls when he left that calling to become a minister of the Gospel, says that all Christians are called to self-examination, no Christian is called to introspection. Here's the difference: self-examination opens the heart up, looks inside and asks the Lord Jesus to look in with you in order to take a spiritual inventory of what the Lord is doing in your heart and in your life. Self-examination does not last long. You close it up again, you sew it up, and you let the Lord do his keyhole surgery on whatever needs to be done. You look to the Lord to deal with it. Okay? That's self-examination, introspection, on the other hand, opens it up, preoccupies itself with things that are above its status, keeps looking at the problem imagining more problems than are there without the Lord by their side to be able to distinguish between that which is really serious and that which is normal; you keep looking at the problem, imagining the problem, you get caught in a vortex of despair. The key is in examining yourself to keep looking to the Lord.

I love the way in which in our Communion service it says, "Let a man or person examine themselves and so take the bread and take the cup." Not examine yourself and don't do anything. No, if you examine yourself and you see stuff there, what do you need? You need the mercy and the grace and the help of God. Take the bread, take the cup that are the signs and symbols and seals of the help of God and the mercy of God in your life. Do that. Remember to do that, will you, when you need to do it?

These people, however, that are being described here never worry about what's in their heart. They never examine themselves. They certainly never get into introspection about their spiritual condition. They have taste, they have feelings, they've been affected by Christianity, they're interested in what Christians are interested in, they do those things, and then one day they let it all go and it says it's impossible, that is absolutely impossible that their repentance can ever be renewed. Why? Because it was never real in the first place.

Now what might be the evidences of spiritual apostasy? In the end, it's fruitlessness. That's what is being described there in verse 7 and 8, isn't it? Here's a piece of land, it's been cultivated, it's been watered, and what God is looking for is a crop useful to those for whose sake it's cultivated and they receive God's blessing, but if you're not cultivating yourself spiritually, if you're not absorbing the moisture of God's word and grace and your life is bearing thorns and thistles, it's worthless, near to being cursed and cast into the fire.

Well, he describes a decisive test. He says in verses 9 to 12 to these people he's writing to, "I've said this to you, I've laid this out before you," but he says to them, "though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we are sure of better things, things that belong to salvation." Why has he given them a stern rebuke? Because they've been regressing spiritually. He's warning them that they're getting back to the border. He's saying, "At the border there are people like this. You don't want to be one of those people. You don't want to show that you're one of those people. What do I want you to do? I want you to press into the deeper things of God. I want you to push further into the deeper doctrines and truths of God." He's warning them not to trifle with this; not to think it's okay and be laissez-faire about this matter. We're convinced about better things of you.

On what is he building his confidence? Well, he's trusting in God. God is not unjust. God knows your heart. God knows what's going on in your heart. Whatever conflicts you're going through, whatever failures you're going through, nonetheless, God understands and knows your heart. He knows that a believer can go through their life and then at some point fall into sin, but he knows that that fall into sin will not be permanent. It may last a few years before they're restored again, but they will be restored again. He knows that a believer can pick up false ideas and entertain them in their mind for a little while but he knows that will not be the final state of that believer. He knows that and the author is encouraged to know that because God is not unjust, he will not overlook your work, the love you've shown for his name in serving the saints. There's the evidence of grace. One of the evidences of grace is that you love God's people; you want to be with God's people; you want to be identified with God's people. One of the marks of an apostate is that he rejects God's people. He goes out from them. He hates the church of God. He despises the people of God. He mocks them and he will spend his lifetime trying to make the church of God look like a harlot instead of a beautiful bride.

That's the mark of the apostate but he's saying to these people, "You love the church. You love the people of God. You show your love to the saints, you serve the saints and you're still doing this. There's hope for you. You're not in that category yet." And what is he doing? He's wooing them back to growing spiritually and to pressing on to know the Lord. That's what he's doing and he's encouraging them to think that there are two tests or that the test is twofold, bearing fruit, the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, self-control, these things, encourage that fruit in your life and it is persevering. He that continues to the end shall be saved. Believers are kept by the power of God through faith for a final salvation and an inheritance that will never perish, spoil or fade.

We must not confuse spiritual regression and spiritual apostasy. Let me illustrate it like this. There are two men in the Bible who had the same privileges, committed the same sins and had two very different ends. You know who I'm thinking of. I'm thinking of Simon Peter and Judas Iscariot. They were both apostles of Jesus, disciples of Jesus, both used by Jesus in his service. They walked with him all the days of his public ministry. They heard him teach. They ate, drank, slept and were with him all the time throughout his ministry. When Jesus said one of them was going to betray him, they didn't think

Judas Iscariot. He fitted in very well. He was one of the bunch. He was trusted. They made him the treasurer. Well, either they trusted him or they didn't really like him and they made him the treasurer. Sometimes those two things go together because that's a hard job, you know. As I recall over 46 years of whatever it is I've been doing, we always have to persuade people to become the treasurer. Anyway, so he was the treasurer. He did the job nobody else wanted and he was part of the apostolic bunch. Peter, well, you know Peter. Both those men committed the same sin, they denied, rejected Jesus. Judas by betraying him, Peter by denying him with oaths and curses three times publicly to other people, "I blankety-blankety-blankety-blank do not know the man." Both betrayed Jesus. Both denied Jesus. And what was it that they were resisting? Both of them were resisting the idea of a crucified Jesus. Both of them were pushing against this idea that Jesus Christ, Jesus of Nazareth could be the Messiah and be crucified and yet the reality is both of those men with the same background, with the same sin, met two different ends. Judas Iscariot, Simon Peter if you'd seen him on the night Jesus was betrayed after they had both sinned, you would have seen tears of remorse in the eyes of Judas, you'd have seen tears of remorse in the eyes of Peter; you might have concluded that both of those men together had come to see what a foolish thing they'd done. But no, one of those men hanged himself. He saw no future with Christ. He had rejected Christ and because he rejected Christ, he rejected life. The other man in spite of his misery, embarrassment, failure, and remorse over his sin, found the company of Jesus' people. If he couldn't have Jesus, he could be in the company of those who loved Jesus. He found their company and he stayed with them. He wanted to be with them because they'd been with Jesus. He knew his only way back was to be with the people of God whereas Judas Iscariot rejected the people of God and went out on his own. And the key thing is that they, the issue over which they fell was a crucified Savior. You see, apostasy is a final rejection of Christ. There is no way back because there is no desire to get back whereas when a believer falls, when a believer sins, he finds his way back to Jesus' people and then he finds his way back to Jesus.

Maybe you're here this morning and you've fallen into some terrible sin or you have a lifestyle that makes you feel it hard for you to be at home among Christians and to come back to your Lord, maybe you've even abandoned the Christian faith for a little while, but today there's a stirring inside you, perhaps a longing, we might say a longing to come home again, may you come home? Of course you may. But you say to me, "Perhaps I've committed the unpardonable sin." Does that bother you? Does that concern you that you might have committed the unpardonable sin and that you might be without your Savior forever? Does that concern you? Can I tell you this: that would never ever concern an apostate. That would never enter the mind of an apostate that committing the unpardonable sin was a problem. It is an evidence of the grace of God in you if you have even that question in your mind. Of course you have not committed the unpardonable sin. Come home and welcome to the Lord Jesus who waits for you as he did for Simon Peter to forgive your sin and restore you to fellowship with him.

*Father, we pray that you would take your word today and in searching our hearts show us how far perhaps we've regressed in order that we might collect our thoughts and get ourselves together again and press on into the word of God that we might grow thereby.*

*Or perhaps you've even used this message today to penetrate by the Holy Spirit through the barriers of someone's mind and heart, making them see that up to this point they've been on the wrong side of that dividing wall, they're on the minus side; that even though they've thought they've been with Christ, they are without him. Lord, we pray that you would break through that barrier that today they would feel you breaking through, your word breaking through and that you would give them saving faith and eternal life and make them part of the family of God. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*