

- b. These Hebrews had regressed to the point that they needed to be instructed again in the elementary principles of Christian truth. It was both culpable and tragic that they'd reduced themselves to spiritual infants, but that didn't have to be the last word. They could restore the dilapidated foundation of their understanding and faith, and they needed to do so for the sake of their perseverance and ultimate maturity in Christ. This meant moving beyond a rudimentary understanding and faith, summarized by the writer in terms of "*repentance from dead works and faith toward God, of instruction about washings, and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment*" (6:1-2).

This obviously isn't an exhaustive list of basic Christian doctrines, but it provides some insight into the sorts of issues that were part of Christian instruction in the first century. The writer listed six distinct matters, which form three related pairs: 1) *repentance* and *faith*; 2) *washings* and *laying on of hands*; 3) *resurrection* and *judgment*. Importantly, scholars have noted that these are also *Jewish* doctrines, and a few of them are actually more integral to Judaism than Christianity.

That is especially the case with *washings* and *laying on of hands*. The plural form of the noun "washings" shows that the writer was referring to ceremonial cleansing, not Christian baptism. And, though the practice of laying on hands existed in the early Christian community (ref. Acts 8:14-17, 9:1-17; 1 Timothy 4:14, 5:22; 2 Timothy 1:6), it was *prescribed* for Israel's life under the Law of Moses, especially in relation to sacrificial rituals (Leviticus 1:1-5, 3:1-8, 4:1-7, 16:1-22, 24:10-16; Numbers 8:5-16).

The other four examples – repentance, faith toward God, resurrection, and final judgment – are clearly central to Christian doctrine and practice, *but they were just as important in Israel's covenant life and faithfulness*. As God's election on behalf of the nations, Israel (the seed of Abraham) was to be a consecrated and faithful "son," separated from "dead works" (i.e., human conduct that tends toward death; ref. Deuteronomy 30; cf. Joshua 23). So also resurrection and final judgment were central to the Jewish eschatological vision and hope during the second temple period.

The fact that these six matters were fundamental to Jewish doctrine and practice isn't coincidental, but crucial to the writer's point. For they, like everything in Judaism, had found their fulfillment in Jesus and were transformed in Him. So these *Jewish* readers had to come to grips with this transformation as a foundational part of their embrace of Jesus as Israel's Messiah. (So Paul's message to his Jewish brethren – Acts 13:14-41, 17:1-3, 10-11). Thus these matters were *elemental* (6:1) to Jewish converts in a way unknown to Gentiles: Gentiles had to renounce their natural and pagan notions when they embraced Jesus as Messiah, but Jews had to embrace Him as the fulfillment of all they were, knew and believed.

These Hebrew believers had gone through the process of rethinking their own Jewish identity, faith, practice and hope in the light of Jesus as Israel's Messiah, *and apparently this rethinking was the focal point of their crisis of faith*. They'd spent far more years in Judaism than they had as disciples of Jesus, and it would have been relatively easy to slip back into old convictions and patterns of thinking, especially under the pressure of persecution and suffering. The writer was aware of this, and penned his letter to encourage them to hold fast to Jesus and press on toward maturity in Him, just as he required of himself (6:1). At the same time, he recognized the possibility of falling away, and the particular danger for Jews who'd come to faith in Jesus. In their case, they could fall away without realizing they'd done so. F. F. Bruce observes:

“Hebrews [i.e., Jewish Christians] were exposed to a subtle danger which could not be experienced by converts from paganism. If a convert from paganism gave up Christianity and reverted to paganism, there was a clean break between the faith which he renounced and the paganism to which he returned. But it was possible for the recipients of this letter, yielding gradually to pressures from various quarters, to give up more and more those features of faith and practice which were distinctive of Christianity, and yet to feel that they had not abandoned the basic principles of repentance and faith, the realities denoted by religious ablutions and the laying on of hands, the expectation of resurrection and the judgment of the age to come.”

For these reasons, these Hebrews needed to be especially vigilant and discerning. Already they'd suffered decline and compromised their progress in the faith; to continue down this path might find them forfeiting Christ altogether, even perhaps without realizing it. They needed to take serious stock of themselves and recommit to their Lord and their growth in Him, seeking and relying on God's care and provision (6:3).

This is the framework for understanding verses 4-8, which Christians readily conscript into debates about “eternal security” and the question of losing one's salvation. But as with any scriptural context, approaching this passage with a personal or doctrinal agenda will put the interpreter on the wrong footing and set him up to draw wrong conclusions from it; at the very least, conclusions that are peripheral to its point.

The first thing, then, to note about this passage is that it addresses the issue of a transient encounter with divine truth and power focused on the person and work of Jesus the Messiah. Specifically, the writer enumerated five matters of encounter with God's truth and power associated with His *word* and *Spirit* (vv. 4-5), but then insisted that turning away from those bestowals amounts to putting *the Messiah*, God's Son, to open shame and effectively crucifying Him anew (v. 6).

In this way the writer implied what the New Testament scriptures everywhere openly declare. And that is that Jesus, the incarnate and exalted Son, is the full substance, truth and power of the living God, and that this truth and power are communicated to human beings by the Holy Spirit, who now, in the fullness of the times, has been “poured out” as the Spirit of the Messiah (cf. John 14:1-3, 16-26, 16:13-15; Acts 1:1-8, 16:6-7; Romans 8:9-10; Philippians 1:19-20; Colossians 1:25-27).

A second observation about this passage is that the five specifics in 6:4-5 closely correspond with the six elemental truths the writer enumerated in verses 1-2. For, repentance and faith concern one’s response to revealed truth (Mark 1:14-15; Acts 2:22-41, 20:17-21), while washings (cleansing) and laying on of hands implicate the work of the Spirit (cf. Ezekiel 36:22-27 with Titus 3:5-6). So resurrection and final judgment pertain to the last day and future consummation, and so correspond to the “powers of the age to come.” *Another crucial point of correspondence is that the things listed in vv. 4-5 were also central to first-century Judaism, and thus were transformed in Jesus to become foundational Christian truths.*

Christians don’t tend to associate those things with Judaism and Israel under the Mosaic Covenant, ***but every Jew claimed all of them as part of his life and faithfulness toward God.*** God had *enlightened* His covenant people by election and revelation, giving them His *word* (Torah) and putting His *Spirit* in their midst to lead and instruct them by His works of power. And because He chose them on behalf of the world to be His instruments of reconciliation and renewal, Israel’s faith and practice were firmly grounded in the hope of resurrection and final judgment, which eschatological realities they “tasted” in advance as Yahweh’s Spirit continued to lead them and work among them unto that goal (cf. Exodus 20:1-24:4; Isaiah 32-35, 63:7-16; Ezekiel 37; Daniel 12:1-3).

Recognizing the five matters of 6:4-5 as *Israelite* phenomena (and not uniquely Christian) is crucially important, for this provides the proper context for interpreting them individually and collectively. And when this approach is followed, it removes the problem of the writer apparently indicating that Christians can lose their salvation. His language points in the same direction and reinforces this contextual understanding.

First, *enlightenment* (6:4a) doesn’t connote regeneration or coming to a saving knowledge of Jesus, but to the circumstance of being illumined – in context, being subjected to the influence of God’s illumining light. Again, every Jew viewed himself in this way. Residing in the illumination of Yahweh’s light is what it meant to be His covenant people (cf. Exodus 10:21-23, 13:21-22 with Psalm 4:1-8, 18:28, 27:1, 36:1-9, 44:1-8), which truth was poignantly captured in the blessing Yahweh commanded Aaron and his sons to pronounce on Israel (Numbers 6:22-27).

So Israel had “*tasted of the heavenly gift (God’s calling, faithfulness and provision) and partaken in the Holy Spirit*” (6:4b). The latter has proven especially troublesome, since Christians instinctively associate it with the new birth. That is, one “partakes” in the Spirit when he is regenerated and indwelt by the Spirit, indicating that the writer was referring to “saved” persons. And where this is assumed, the writer’s insistence that such ones can fall away without remedy (v. 6) necessarily implies that there are circumstances in which Christians can lose their salvation.

- But interpreting this statement in terms of Israel’s relationship with God’s Spirit removes the question of “eternal security.” The matter at hand as it pertains to Israel isn’t whether a saved Jew could lose his salvation, but the nation’s history of resisting the Spirit’s leading, power and provision (cf. Isaiah 63:7-10 with Acts 7:51).
- At the same time, the writer issued his warning to Jewish *Christians*, so that his claims about apostasy must pertain to followers of Jesus, and not just to Old Covenant Israel. The writer’s language is the key: The noun rendered “partaker” signifies *sharing* or *companionship*, with the context determining the nature and extent of this relationship (ref. 1:9, 3:1, 14, 12:8; cf. also Luke 5:7). Here *partaking* is juxtaposed with *tasting*, which signifies a sampling experience. The indication, then, is that the writer was referring to a close experience of the Spirit’s presence and power, but one that amounts to a “tasting” (cf. Acts 8:14-19).

This sort of “partaking” characterized Israel’s historical relationship with Yahweh’s Spirit, and the writer was warning his Jewish readers about following in their fathers’ footsteps. They, too, could find themselves falling away from the Living God – now fully revealed in Jesus the Messiah – even after experiencing the Spirit’s illumination and power.

The same tasting experience applied to their interaction with “*the good word of God*” and “*the powers of the age to come*” (6:5). Their Israelite forefathers had “tasted” Yahweh’s word through His covenant (Torah) and the ministration of His priests and prophets. And the nation’s experience of numerous deliverances, which underscored Israel’s identity as a people called out of death into life, directed their minds toward the day of ultimate deliverance and renewal and bolstered their confidence that their God who had promised would indeed prove faithful. *That day had now come, and these Hebrews stood in its light.* God’s word of promise was now the word of fulfillment in the incarnate Word, and through His person and work the powers of the coming age (the *Olam Ha Ba* for which Israel waited) were manifest in the present through the comprehensive judgment accomplished at Calvary and the resurrection that ensued. These Hebrews saw realized what their forefathers saw only at a distance (11:32-40).