

The implication, then, couldn't be lost on these Hebrew readers: If their Israelite ancestors who lived during the time of promise were culpable for their unbelief and unfaithfulness, how much more their descendants who had the privilege of seeing the promises fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah (cf. Luke 19:28-44; John 15:22-24)? The Jewish recipients of this letter were among those children, but as those who'd not only witnessed Yahweh's work of fulfillment, but acknowledged and embraced it by embracing Jesus as Israel's long-awaited Messiah, thereby affirming to all men that God is indeed faithful and true and has kept His word. But having done so, what would be the outcome and their recompense if they now denied their own affirmation by shrinking back and falling away?

This is the perspective from which the writer penned his warning, and it shows why he insisted that, for such ones, "*it is impossible to renew them again to repentance*" (6:6). Having once "tasted" the word of truth – the truth that is fully embodied and disclosed in Jesus the Messiah and illumined by His Spirit, and then turning from it, there remains no other truth to be sought or embraced. If a person languishing in a vast and waterless desert tastes life-sustaining water and then pushes it away to seek something else to slake his thirst, he will surely perish. So it is here: It's not that God is incapable or unwilling to restore the one who turns away from Jesus; it's simply that no other resource exists. If the One who *is* life is rejected, there is no life to be had. The point of limitation, then, isn't divine capability or desire, but the nature of the need and the constraint it imposes. Life can only be obtained from life (John 6:48-58).

The writer elaborated on this impossibility by explaining that those who fall away after experiencing the truth and power associated with the Messiah and the renewal He's inaugurated are effectively subjecting Him to another crucifixion and open shame. Two things about this statement are especially important to note:

- First, the writer's grammar associates the impossibility of repentance with this act of crucifying and shaming. Specifically, those who fall away from the Messiah (in the manner he's discussing here) cannot be restored to Him because they are crucifying Him *to themselves* and openly ridiculing Him. And they do so, not as a one-time action, but a persistent disposition of mind and heart. By turning away from Jesus (overtly or otherwise) after once embracing Him, such ones testify that they regard Him as an imposter to be rejected and denounced.
- Secondly, the writer's warning has universal application, but he chose his language with his original Hebrew readers in mind. The epistle suggests that they were being persecuted by their Jewish countrymen as apostates who were following after a false messiah.

They were being pressured to renounce the impostor and return to Yahweh, their people, and their ancestral faith. So the writer wanted them to realize that forsaking Jesus would indeed reunite them with their Jewish brethren, but in a way they likely hadn't considered: *They wouldn't be rejoining Yahweh's covenant people, but the unbelieving nation of Israel that had indicted and scorned Jesus and orchestrated His crucifixion* (Matthew 27:1-44). Returning to their previous convictions and way of life under Judaism (v. 1) wouldn't deliver them from apostasy, but *render* them apostates, since Jesus *is* Yahweh's Messiah, sent by Him to fulfill all His good word to Israel (ref. Acts 2-3, 5:12-39, 6:1-7:53, 13:14-41, 24:1-16). Turning away from Jesus would reunite these Hebrew readers with their Jewish brethren, but in solidarity with their unbelief and condemnation, as those who continue to crucify the Messiah to themselves and subject Him to open shame.

Death is the fate of all who don't find life in Jesus the Messiah, and this is true regardless of the circumstance surrounding one's alienation from Him. Yet there is greater guilt, and so greater condemnation, for those who depart from Him after embracing Him; it's better never to have known Him than to know Him and forsake Him (cf. 10:26-31, 12:25; also Luke 12:47-48; 2 Peter 2:20-22). So the writer concluded his warning with an illustration underscoring this truth – an illustration that his readers would have instantly connected with Israel's own experience with God. It parallels many scriptural depictions of Israel's relationship with Yahweh, perhaps most notably Isaiah's *parable of the vineyard* (5:1-7).

- This parable uses the familiar imagery of a vine and vineyard to depict God's covenant household (Psalm 80:1-16; Isaiah 3:13-15; cf. also John 15:1-6), and it presents a picture of a choice vine lovingly planted in fertile and well-prepared soil, and then carefully nurtured and protected. Because of the vine's choiceness, and the provision and care given to it, the owner had every reason to expect it to bear produce good fruit, but instead it produced only worthless fruit (5:1-2). As a result, he determined to withdraw his care and protection and let the vineyard be overrun and trampled underfoot, thereby condemning it and laying it to waste (5:5-6).
- The parable identifies the house of Israel as the vineyard, Judah (the remnant of David's kingdom) as the "delightful planting," and Yahweh of Hosts as the vineyard's owner/keeper (5:7; cf. 3:14).
- Thus the scenario described in the parable signified Yahweh's absolute faithfulness toward His covenant people, His rightful expectation of them, their intractable rebellion, and the destruction they would soon incur at the hands of Assyria and Babylon.

- And, with an eye to their objection to this terrible fate (cf. Ezekiel 18:1-20; 33:10-21), the parable has Yahweh challenging Jerusalem and Judah to judge where the fault lay; faced with the truth, they couldn't fault their God, because He'd done everything possible to secure their fruitfulness; their calamity was entirely their own doing (5:3-4; cf. Jeremiah 2:1-37; Ezekiel 24:15-23; Hosea 11:1ff).

The Hebrew readers understood this imagery and were well familiar with the woeful historical circumstance the parable depicted. Their forefathers had squandered their covenant election, unique privilege, and Yahweh's unfailing lovingkindness (Romans 9:1-5), until there was no recourse except for cities to be devastated, houses abandoned, and the sanctuary land made utterly desolate (Isaiah 6:1-12). Now the writer was confronting them with another parable that concerned *them* and the peril they faced:

- They were like carefully tended, well-watered ground from which a good and beneficial yield is rightly expected. If they brought forth such a rich harvest, they would receive God's blessing (6:7).
- But if their yield ended up being only thorns and thistles, they would receive the recompense appropriate to that produce (6:8).

This imagery drew the readers' minds back to Israel's tragic history with God, but it also reminded them of the outcome of that history in which God fulfilled His faithfulness to His covenant people and all that He'd promised concerning them. This reminder is evident from the writer's reference to *thorns* and *thistles*. For these are scriptural symbols for the cursed, desolate creation under God's judgment (ref. Genesis 3:17-19; Isaiah 55:1-13; cf. also Isaiah 34:1-13; Hosea 10:7-8), a fact known to both the writer and his audience. Thus this choice of imagery wasn't arbitrary, but intentional. It served to remind the readers of the core reality of the messianic work: Jesus' life, death, resurrection and enthronement was precisely Israel's God fulfilling His ancient, unwavering oath to liberate the creation from its curse and renew all things through the seed promised to Eve, Abraham and David – the seed who was the foundation and goal of Israel's election, covenant life and history.

The "good news" held out to Israel and the nations is that Yahweh, in His Messiah, has conquered the curse and delivered the world from its forced labor of producing thorns and thistles. And though the non-human creation longs for the day when it will enjoy *its* share in that liberation and renewal (Romans 8:18-22), many humans – including those pressuring these Hebrews to return to the former order – are content with the old creation and its cursed fruit. But all who are part of it will be consumed with it in the day when all things are renewed. That fate awaited the readers (v. 8), should they fall away from the Lord of new creation.