Hebrews 6:1-8
"*Moving on from Immaturity*"

Introduction:

In demonstrating the superiority of Christ's priesthood to that of the Levitical priesthood, the author expressed that he found that he was encountering difficulty teaching them in light of how they had become, by that time, sluggish in their understanding of spiritual things. In this passage the author addressed this problem directly and issued a warning to his readers concerning the danger of remaining in their present condition.

There is an interpretive problem regarding the flow of thought that runs from chapter five through chapter six. The problem is that in the previous passage, the author wrote that his readers were unlikely to grasp the additional things he wanted them to understand because of the spiritual immaturity that had come to characterize them. But, now in this passage, the author conveyed that he was going to go ahead and instruct them in the very things he had previously said they were unable to digest. The problem then is how do we resolve the seeming conflict? Were his readers mature enough to follow what he was teaching them or not? The best explanation is that in the previous passage, the author was using exaggeration for rhetorical effect. He was not dispassionately diagnosing their spiritual state, rather he was seeking to shake them out of their lethargy by accusing them of behaving as if they were spiritual infants. Having done this, the author hoped his rebuke would motivate his readers to put forth the effort to intelligently digest the advanced teaching that he needed to give to them.

I. The Admonition: (6:1-3)

Simply stated the opening admonition in this verse is a call to pursue spiritual growth. In light of the problem the author identified, he wrote, "*Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection*" (vs.1a). The exhortation "*let us go on to perfection*" is central to the first three verses of this chapter. The participles which precede and follow this main verb ("*leaving*" and "*not laying again*") clarify what the author had in mind in giving them this exhortation. The Greek word translated as "*discussion*" would be better translated as "*doctrine*" or "*message*" (ESV, NASB, HCSB, NRSV), as it conveys the idea of what is expressed by one party, rather than by two or more. The author's literal wording "*leaving the beginning of the word of Christ*" was intended to be a parallel to the expression in 5:12 "*the first principles of the oracles of God*". In that earlier verse the author indicated that their reasoning gave the impression that they needed to be re-taught these basic truths, but here he was making the point that they needed to move well beyond those basic theological truths and open their minds to more advanced theological instruction. Given what the author wrote next, and what he would write later on in this letter it is likely that the phrase "*the elementary principles of Christ*" must refer to some initial things about Christ that were taught to these believers that differentiated the Christian Gospel from Judaism. The participle translated as "*leaving*" refers to moving beyond these

elementary teachings in the sense that one builds upon them a deeper understanding of spiritual truth, and not a moving on where one forgets about those things that were learned before.

When the author wrote, "*let us go on to perfection*", he was urging them to move beyond the basics in the quest of perfection. The Greek term translated as "*let us go on*" does not primarily imply putting forth personal effort, but instead personal surrender to an active influence. This is because the author used a passive form of the verb, and this expresses the idea of being carried by someone or something else to some place. The idea being that rather than attempting to make themselves what God wanted them to be, their task was to submit to God and cooperate with the transformation that He desired to accomplish within them. This conveys the Biblical idea that it is God's sanctifying work within us that makes true spiritual transformation possible (II Cor.3:5-6). The Greek word translated as "*perfection*" refers to completion. This is a general concept that is used to convey a number of different nuances. In this context the sort of completion that the author had in mind was achieving spiritual maturity, which was meant to be their defining goal.

Then the author specified what he meant by the elementary principles of Christ, he wrote, "*not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment*" (vs.1b-2). The general nature of the description coupled with the specific things that the author chose to cite, suggests that these six things were basic principles about the Christian faith that had counterparts in Judaism. This seems to further suggest that the author referred to these things because his readers were choosing to focus on these elementary ideas because it gave them justification to remain within Judaism, for since these were beliefs and practices common to both faiths, focusing on these things would allow them to maintain an understanding of themselves as Christians while allowing them also to be identified as Jews by the surrounding culture. It is certain that they did not want to completely distinguish themselves from Christ, because the author referred to these six things as elementary teachings about Jesus Christ. The author grouped these foundational truths in three sets of pairs. Grouping them in this way implies that the things that are paired together were related to one another in some way (which in turn helps us identify specifically what the author had in mind when he employed these designations):

- <u>Repentance from dead works and faith toward God</u>: These were elementary truths that a person would be taught regarding how to receive forgiveness from God. It would involve repentance from attempting to please God through one's own efforts and instead placing one's entire confidence in God as the one who provides salvation. Since repentance is paired here with faith, the word was used in the negative sense, focusing on what one turns away from when one was converted. "*Dead works*" refers to sinful actions, works that lead to death. The expression does not specifically refer to works that violate God's law, but to works done by those who are spiritually dead.

- Baptisms and laying on of hands: These relate to the basic instruction that was given in regard to one's assumption into the believing community. The plural word "*baptisms*" was used because the author was referring to teachings that distinguished Christian baptism from various cleansing ceremonies practiced by contemporary Jews. Laying on of hands was a symbolic practice whereby the other members of the fellowship would initiate a new believer into their midst.
- Resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment: These related to the basic instruction regarding the expectation that believers were to have about the eschatological events that would define the future according to Scripture.

Part of the problem that confronted Jewish Christians in the early portion of Church history was the superficial similarity that existed between the elementary tenets of Christianity and those of Judaism. These similarities at times made it possible for Christian Jews to think that they could be Christian and yet continue to hold on to their Jewish identity. Therefore, the danger of apostasy was much greater for believing Jews in this period than it was for gentile converts from paganism.

In light of the call to his readers to pursue spiritual maturity, the author went on to write "*and this we will do if God permits*" (vs.3). Through these words the author indicated that he would press on toward the goal of instructing them about their need to grow and that he was trusting that his readers would respond positively to that instruction. It may sound odd that the author wrote "*if God permits*". Was the author saying that God might not be willing for them to be led to maturity (even if they wanted to be so led?). No, such an understanding would be a distortion of what the author was expressing. Rather, the author's point was simpler, he was merely expressing that as always, growing in spiritual maturity is only possible when enabled by the grace and empowerment of God.

III. The Danger: (6:4-6)

These three verses are considered to be among the most difficult verses in the Bible to interpret. The evidence for this is the number of interpretations given to these verses among self-proclaimed Evangelicals. The following are the ten most prevalent positions that Evangelical scholars have adopted to explain these verses:

1. They teach that if one loses their salvation, it cannot be regained
2. They are a warning to sinful individuals about falling under God's temporal discipline
3. They are a warning to individual believers about losing rewards in the afterlife
4. They are a warning about judgment that will fall upon the fellowship as a whole if they as a group actually commit apostasy
5. They are teaching that judgment for apostasy is inescapable for the individual, however God can and will save those who are His

6. The author's admonition in these verses was addressed to the general audience, among whom are some who are unregenerate, the warning is directed to them, not to those who are genuinely saved
7. The passage teaches that it is impossible for one to be renewed to the initial experience of repentance, however one can be renewed to salvation
8. These verses are a warning that renewal is impossible as long as they continue in their rebellious state
9. The warning is directed toward those who have had a significant spiritual experience within Christianity, but have never been redeemed
10. The author used hyperbole to warn true Christians what would happen should they actually apostatize, something they would not ultimately do if they were genuine Christians

These three verses represent a single sentence. The sentence is long because it is a complex sentence with a number of subordinate ideas. Therefore, the best way to begin to understand what the author was expressing in this sentence is to examine its grammatical structure. The main thought of the sentence begins in verse four and is completed in verse six. That main thought is:

"*it is impossible…to renew them again to repentance*"

The subordinate ideas that elaborate on this basic thought are found in the latter part of verse four, in verse five, and in the first part of verse six. In these verses are six phrases that describe those who in the main part of the sentence are said to be impossible to renew to repentance:

- "*those who were once enlightened*"
- *"have tasted the heavenly gift"*
- *"have become partakers of the Holy Spirit"*
- *"have tasted the good word of God"*
- *"have tasted the powers of the age to come"*
- *"if they fall away*"

The point that the author was making, was not focused upon something that might be lost, but upon the impossibility of being renewed to repentance. Therefore, if the author was indicating that salvation can be lost, his point was that it can never again be restored. The same is true with each one of the various views listed above. Whatever the loss was that the author was referring to, it was something that was irrevocably lost and there is no possibility of a renewal to repentance that would allow one to regain that which one had lost. Therefore, the author intended to communicate with his readers that there was no middle ground between pressing on to the goal of spiritual maturity and falling away.

With that in mind, how are we to decide which of the options above represents the truth that God intended to convey to us through these verses?

One of the suggestions was that that author was exaggerating with hyperbole or was speaking of a hypothetical situation that could not happen. In response, this

passage cannot be understood as a hypothetical warning, or the use of hyperbole, because that sort of warning is really no warning at all. Clearly since the author repeats the same general warning several times throughout the epistle in various ways, with great urgency, he expected his readers to take it to heart. But one has no need to fear a hypothetical scenario that can never actually occur. Hypothetical situations therefore are used to illustrate principles or ideas, not for warnings, because they carry no real practical consequence or relevance. The author is clearly concerned that a very real consequence awaits his readers and that is why he gave the warning. Therefore, this passage cannot be understood as a hypothetical warning to true believers about what would happen in an impossible scenario

Another popular idea is that this is a warning about losing eternal rewards if one falls away. This is another idea that is not consistent with what the author wrote in these verses. There is nothing said in this or any other context of the various warning passages about rewards. In fact, a parallel passage makes it very clear that the author was writing about escaping the prospect of eternal damnation:

> "*there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries*" (10:26-27).

Some scholars have suggested that the following illustration (vs.7-8) refers to the consuming of the produce of one's life and thus clarifies that the loss of rewards is in mind. However, this is not the intention of the illustration. This is clearly demonstrated by the grammar. In the phrase "*whose end is to be burned*", the pronoun is feminine singular and thus must represent a noun that is feminine singular. The only feminine singular noun in the Greek sentence is "*ground*". The words translated as "*thorns and briars*" cannot be the antecedent of this pronoun because one of the terms is a feminine plural noun, and the other is a masculine plural noun. Therefore, the principles of Greek grammar rule out this interpretation. It is the soil or ground (which represents the individual) that is burned, and thus it refers to judgment upon them, not upon their works.

Still another view is that the passage is about the possibility of the loss of one's physical life as a punishment for apostasy. The argument in favor of this is that the Jewish Christians were thinking of enlisting in the fight to liberate Judea from Rome, and since this was not God's will, He would not protect the Christians who disobeyed Him and went anyway. The first problem with this view is that there is nothing in the text itself to actually commend it. It is pure speculation. More importantly, the epistle clarifies that the sin was "*falling away*", which cannot be construed to mean enlisting in a Jewish revolution. The second, broader problem is that the language of the warnings throughout the letter gives no evidence that the temporal punishment of physical death is the potential judgment facing the readers. Reference is often made to how physical death was the punishment experienced by the wilderness generation, and so by analogy it is what would face these Christians who would be guilty of the same sin as that earlier generation. But for the analogy to hold, we would have to assume that the wilderness generation all experienced

spiritual salvation, something that is difficult to conclude since they were defined by unbelief. Beyond that the warnings in this letter are tied to the content of the Gospel. It would seem to be inescapable to conclude that final rejection of the Gospel would be punished with eternal damnation.

There are really only two interpretations that fit the language of the text. Either the author was talking about those who are genuine believers who can no longer be redeemed, or mere professors of faith who cannot be redeemed.

To answer which of these the author had in mind, it is helpful to examine how the author himself describes those who cannot be renewed to repentance:

- "***who were once enlightened***" – to be enlightened means to be the recipient of spiritual truth, to be given spiritual insight or understanding.
- "***have tasted the heavenly gift***" – to taste means to have a significant experience of something (see 2:9). The reference here is general, and thus it is impossible to be dogmatic about specifics (like whether it refers to God's provision of Christ as Savior). It is best to conclude that this refers in a general way to someone enjoying the experience God gives to those who are associated with His people.
- "***have become partakers of the Holy Spirit***" – to be a partaker meant to share in something, or have a part in it, and this refers to experiencing the Holy Spirit in some way. Though this represents the strongest implication that salvation is possibly in view, the wording is general enough (in contrast to a statement about the indwelling of the individual by the Spirit) that it could refer to some other spiritual experience that falls short of salvation.
- "***have tasted the good word of God***" - this refers to experiencing the goodness of the Scriptures.
- *"**have tasted the powers of the age to come***" – this refers to having experienced the supernatural signs and wonders that were manifestations of God's power in the first century.
- "***if they fall away***" – as the English rendering indicates this literally refers to deviating or departing from something in some sense. This word seems to have been used here in the metaphorical sense of no longer being on the right path of life. In the Greek translation of the OT, Ezekiel used this term to refer to apostasy (18:24). In addition, the author of Hebrews elsewhere described the sin that he was concerned these people would commit. He described it in a number of ways; as neglecting so great a salvation (2:3), as having an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God (3:12), sinning willfully after having received the knowledge of the truth (10:26), and refusing Him (i.e. God) who speaks (12:25). All of these fit can easily be understood to be synonyms of "*apostasy*", thus, this is the best understanding of the word.

In looking over these phrases, one should note that in this description of those to whom the warning is addressed there is a complete absence of the terminology that is normally used in contexts speaking of eternal salvation; such as justification, sanctification, redemption, reconciliation, and regeneration. Also, no term or

expression used in this passage is used anywhere else in the NT where the subject of salvation is addressed. Therefore, what stands out about these terms is not their dictionary meaning, but the author's choice to employ this particular terminology in this passage. This would suggest that the author was intentionally speaking of some sort of spiritual experience that was distinct from eternal spiritual salvation.

Also, though the sin involved is clearly apostasy, the above descriptions do not conclusively demonstrate whether the author sees such individuals as genuine believers or not. Therefore, the answer must lay elsewhere. But what is universally acknowledged is that this epistle is one of the finest written documents we have in ancient Greek and that the author thus had a great command of the language. We also know that the entire apostolic band used similar terminology to refer to spiritual salvation. It strains credulity that an author who clearly is a gifted writer, and who passionately wants his readers to understand his point, would then use language different from everyone else to describe the phenomenon of salvation. It is far more likely that this terminology was chosen to describe those who have been intimately acquainted with the faith but having come very close to conversion, they have never actually believed.

There is also the matter of the analogy of faith. Elsewhere it is made abundantly clear that once an individual is saved, they will certainly arrive in God's presence (Jn.5:24; 6:37-39; 10:26-30; Rom.8:29-20, 38-39; Phil.1:6; I John 5:11-13). Therefore, it would represent a complete departure from the rest of the NT if this passage taught that someone could lose their salvation. Therefore, for these reasons one must conclude that the warning does not relate to genuine Christians.

But what is the warning then, since the author is referring to individuals who have professed faith and intimately experienced the Christian life, but have not ever been truly converted? The warning again is "***it is impossible…to renew them again to repentance***". In English, this is not discernable, but the Greek term translated as "*renew*" refers to something that is qualitatively new and different than what preceded it. Therefore, the author was saying that whatever repentance they engaged in prior to this was not repentance that led to salvation. However, if they were to follow through and commit apostasy it would be impossible for them to be brought to the place where they were able to experience the different and genuine repentance that God requires of those who will be saved.

The author then went on to explain why this renewal to repentance would be impossible, "*since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame*" (vs.6c). The author's point was that to have been acquainted as intimately as they were with the truth and then to turn from it, would make them guilty of the deliberate refusal to believe these things they knew to be true because it threatened their self-interests. Thus, they would be like the Jews in Jerusalem who willfully chose to crucify Jesus, despite all they knew about Him, for the same reason. This crucifixion was putting Jesus to open shame due to the understanding that He died as a convicted criminal and false Messiah in the eyes of those Jews and the Roman authorities.

IV. The Illustration: (6:7-8)

The illustration demonstrates that God blesses fruitfulness, and curses barrenness. The author writes, "*For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; 8 but if it bears thorns and briers, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned*" (vs.7-8). In the metaphor the rain represents the outpouring of God's blessings that enriches the recipient so that they will develop as He intends. The useful herbs are the good fruit that God seeks to produce in His people, while the thorns and briars represent fleshly and worthless manifestations of what is in the heart. The cursing and burning are metaphors of eternal damnation that comes upon the unfruitful life. Damnation would not come because they failed to earn eternal life, rather, the lack of fruit demonstrated that those individuals were never born again to eternal life and thus were condemned because their sins were never atoned for (this same idea was taught by Jesus-John 15:1-8).

This agricultural metaphor conveys that God's purpose in redemption was not simply to deliver human beings from eternal destruction but intended to result in the re-creation of individuals who would mirror God's own righteous image (Rom.8:29; Tit.2:14). Therefore, anything less than fruitfulness is not genuine Biblical salvation. The lack of spiritual growth in these readers demonstrated that something was seriously wrong with them. The author does not make a definitive diagnosis of what that was (because he couldn't), he only warned them about the destination that was at the end of the path if they chose to commit apostasy.

Conclusion:

The warning recorded here was not that all the readers were sliding into apostasy, rather it was that if the fellowship remained sluggish and resisted being taken forward into maturity, then some of them might indeed turn their backs on Christ and the salvation that only He can provide. For maximum pastoral impact, the warning was couched in terms that could apply to the reality of their experience of Christ and the Holy Spirit. So, the passage was designed to speak to anyone who confidently identified himself or herself as a Christian. Some people show signs of conversion, but they have a transitory faith. They get caught up in the spiritual experience of a Christian group without being truly regenerate, and then they drift away from Christ when that experience is no longer satisfying.

We live in a time where there is little emphasis on spiritual maturity and godliness. Many believers are deceived into thinking that Christ pays for their sin and leaves them free to pursue any course of life they wish without consequences. The warning in this passage is designed to dissuade us from such conclusions. The warning is not that immaturity can result in a loss of salvation. Instead, the warning is, that in the midst of a group of Christians who are generally spiritually immature, a non-Christian can easily blend in, and never truly understand that salvation is only gained by truly believing in Christ as Savior (believing with a faith that will last a lifetime).