

Impossible to Renew Unto Repentance

by Harry Ironside

The sermon warns against the danger of apostasy and the impossibility of renewing those who have fallen away from the faith.

Scripture: Hebrews 6:4

Topics: "Apostasy", "Genuine Faith"

Description

Harry Ironside emphasizes the grave warnings found in the Epistle to the Hebrews regarding apostasy and the impossibility of renewing those who have once tasted the truth but later turn away. He explains that many may experience enlightenment and even partake in the Holy Spirit without truly knowing Christ, leading to a false sense of security. Ironside reassures true believers that their faith is secure, while cautioning against the dangers of spiritual sloth and the consequences of willful sin. He draws parallels between the experiences of the early Hebrew Christians and the modern church, urging self-examination and genuine faith. The sermon serves as a reminder of the seriousness of rejecting God's grace and the importance of persevering in faith.

Transcript

In Peter's second letter he, I believe, identifies for us the author, under God, of the Epistle to the Hebrews. He mentions a letter written to Jewish believers by "our beloved brother Paul," "in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction" (2 Pet. 3:15-16). As we know, Peter's special ministry was to the circumcision, and he addresses his letters to Christian Jews of the Diaspora, that is, those dispersed among the Gentiles. The letter to the Hebrews therefore must be that referred to in the verses quoted, as no other of Paul's Epistles is addressed to Hebrew believers. And surely there is no other letter in the New Testament which contains more difficult statements than this one. How frequently have ignorant and poorly instructed saints misunderstood such passages as the first part of chapter 6 and the last half of chapter 10. Terrified by what was only intended as a warning against apostasy, true lovers of Christ have fancied that they have committed the unpardonable sin and by crucifying the Son of God afresh have put themselves beyond the pale of mercy. Reason has tottered on the throne as the terrible thought has gripped their consciousness that for them there is now no hope, for so grave is their sin, they fear, it is impossible "to renew them again unto repentance."

Various explanations, or attempted explanations have been given of the passages in question, and godly men have differed greatly as to their proper application. Without going into the subject extensively, it nevertheless seems desirable that we should, in this connection, try to get a real understanding of what is involved in both these solemn warnings. Note carefully the exact words of Hebrews 6:1-13. The paragraph is somewhat lengthy, but it seems necessary to have it all in view if we are to grasp its import properly.

"Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this will we do, if God permit. For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame. For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God: but that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned. But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak. For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labor of love which ye have showed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister. And we desire that every one of you do show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end: that ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises. For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself."

In a previous chapter we have already glanced at verses 1-3. There we saw that "the first principles of the doctrine of Christ," or as the marginal rendering reads, "the word of the beginning of Christ," refers to the preparatory or foundation teaching of the former dispensation, apart from which it is next to impossible really to understand the true Christian doctrine. "Perfection" as used here has no reference to experience, but rather to the body of New Testament teaching which for the well instructed believer supersedes the foundation teaching of that past age. The tendency of these converted Hebrews, or of those among them who professed to be converted through the Gospel message, was to look back longingly to the ritual practices and the partial revelation of the Old Testament, in place of going on to a full understanding and appreciation of the present truth. The Epistle is throughout a warning against possible apostasy where there was unreality, and an exhortation to "go on" to the better things of the New Covenant as contrasted with the lesser things of the Old.

Before examining the solemn statements of verses 4-6, let us consider the closing part of this section, verses 9-13. The writer of Hebrews has no question concerning the ultimate fate of those truly saved though he warns them of the danger involved in spiritual sloth and indifference. But after setting forth the hopeless condition of the apostates depicted in verses 4-8 he says, "But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation though we thus speak." This is most important. If these words mean anything at all, they surely tell us that people might pass through all that is mentioned in verses 4 and 5 without being saved at all. Note this carefully; it will save from confusion of mind: Whatever else the five statements that are enumerated in these verses mean, they do not necessarily accompany salvation. All of them might be true, and yet the soul remain out of Christ.

The evidences of divine life are given in the following verses. There was real devotion to the Lord Himself and unselfish care for His suffering people, seen in these converted Hebrews. Not merely the acceptance of certain doctrines, however true, but real trust in a living Saviour, had made them new creatures, and so

their outward walk evidenced the inward change that had taken place. God, the righteous One, would not overlook all this in the day when He would have to judge the nation to which these believers belonged by natural birth. He would not leave a doubt in the minds of any who truly rested in Christ as to the genuineness of their conversion, even when He warned of the possibility of any unreal professors who had gotten in among them eventually apostatizing. But he would have all carefully examine the foundations of their hope of salvation.

If this is clear now go back and read again the warning: "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame." Who were the people here contemplated? According to verse 9 they were not saved people. In other words, they had never been born again of the Word and Spirit of God.

Who, then, were they? The answer is plain. They were professed converts to Christianity who had witnessed much of the supernatural character of the new and gracious movement, but they had never actually known Christ. They were like those in our Lord's day who believed in the miracles, but did not know the One who wrought them. What is said of their past? There are five statements.

First, they had been enlightened. This is true of every one who listens thoughtfully to the preaching of the Gospel. Light is thereby imparted to him to which he was a stranger before. "The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple." But unhappily many have been thus enlightened who refuse to walk in the light. And we learn in 1 John 1:7 that, "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin." Notice it is where you walk, not how. "Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord." The man who walks in the light the revealing power of God's truth, does not shun its manifestations or turn from its fierce revealing blaze. "God is light and in him is no darkness at all." Facing the light, walking in it, he learns that the blood is sprinkled on the mercy seat from which the light shines. He no longer dreads its brightness but allows it to search him to the depths of his being knowing that the blood meets every evil thing that is thus exposed. This is a very different thing from being simply enlightened.

In the second place, they had tasted of the heavenly gift. Now whether we think of this gift being the Lord Jesus Himself, whom God the Father gave to be the propitiation for our sins, or whether we think of it as that eternal life which is definitely called "the gift of God," it is quite evident that there are many who are for a time greatly impressed by the amazing fact that God has so loved the world as to send His Son into the world that He might give eternal life to all who trust Him; and yet they never truly feed upon the Living Bread that came down from heaven to give life to all who believe on His Name. To taste is one thing; to eat is quite another. There are vast numbers of persons who once seemed to appreciate Christ but have since proven that they never really knew Him, whom to know is life eternal.

Third, they "were made partakers of the Holy Spirit." Surely this implies reality. How could anyone be a partaker of the Spirit of God, and not be saved? I answer, Balaam was; and so was Judas. Yet both are lost. The Spirit of God is sovereign in His working. Yet He compels no one to surrender to Christ, though none would do so apart from His gracious brooding over their hearts. But men may experience much of His convicting power and be deeply stirred as He portrays the preciousness of Christ, and yet may resist His wooing and refuse to heed His message.

Note carefully we are not told that those apostates had ever been regenerated by the Spirit, or sealed, or anointed, or baptized, or filled. They simply became partakers of His power; but did not go on to know truly the Lord. Balaam is a sad example of this, he who felt the power of the Spirit upon him, but "loved the wages of unrighteousness" and never repented of his base intentions, even though not permitted to carry them out. Did not Judas work miracles with the rest in the energy of the Spirit? Apparently he did, for all the Twelve told how the demons were subject unto them, but our Lord declared he was a devil; and we are told he died a suicide and went to his own place.

Fourth, they "tasted the good word of God." This is closely allied to the first statement made by the inspired writer concerning them, yet it is not exactly repetition. They heard the Word preached. It appealed to them. They felt it to be what they needed. But, though they tasted its preciousness, they did not feed on it with a living faith.

And lastly, they had known something of the "powers of the world [or age] to come." The reference is to the miraculous signs that were given by the Lord to authenticate the early Christian message. In the coming age miracles will be the ordinary thing. At the beginning of this dispensation of grace, they were given by our merciful God in order that men might be without excuse for rejecting His Word. And these Hebrews had seen many signs and wonders, so that they were, for a time at least, intellectually convinced of the truth of the new doctrine. But that truth had not been received into the heart. They knew much about Jesus, the Prophet, mighty in word and deed, but they did not know Him as Saviour and Lord by yielding themselves to His authority. While our Lord was on earth there were numbers of temporary followers who believed on Him when they saw the miracles that He wrought, but afterwards went back and walked no more with Him. Continuance is a proof of reality.

We may well challenge our own hearts as to whether we are in any better case than they. Formalists and hypocrites abound on every hand. If we profess to trust Him, do we love Him and seek to glorify Him in our lives? An empty profession saves no one.

In the hour of testing these Hebrews turned back to Judaism. Apparently they were not prepared for the suffering that Christians were called upon to pass through for the Name of the Lord Jesus. So they turned their backs upon Christianity and relapsed into Judaism. In so doing they rejected every testimony that even God could give them. He had nothing hidden in reserve. He had told out all His heart when He spake in His Son. For those who deliberately and definitely refused to accept that testimony, God had nothing more to say. It was impossible to renew them again unto repentance. They positively and defiantly sided with His murderers, and so they crucified the Son of God afresh and put Him to an open shame.

We are not told that God would refuse to save them if at the last they owned their guilt, bad as it was, and sought His forgiveness. We are told that they had so sinned against all light and all knowledge that God had nothing further to put before them. The Spirit of God had given them up, and the day for repentance had gone by. It was not that He would refuse to heed their cry, if they did repent; but He knew they would not. They were given over to hardness of heart and to a seared conscience.

A little parable follows in verses 7 and 8 before the reassuring words of the close of the passage at which we have already looked. Two plots of ground are seen side by side. The soil is alike in each field; the same sun shines upon them both; they are refreshed by the same showers. But at harvest time one produces a fine crop that is a delight to the farmer's heart; the other bears only thorns and briars fit for the fire. What makes the difference? In the one the good seed had found lodgment, but not in the other. The

application is easy. Two boys grow up side by side. They attend the same synagogue; later both come under Christian influence; they go to the same meetings; they hear the same preaching; they see the same signs and wonders wrought by the Spirit of God; they both feel His convicting power; they alike profess to believe in His Name; both are baptized; both sit at the Table of the Lord. But when fiery persecution breaks out against the infant church, one basely deserts the cause, while the other stands firm as a rock. The reason is easy to discern. One has received the good seed into an honest heart. The other has only made a lip profession, based upon a mere intellectual and emotional acquaintance with Christian truth.

It is the same in Hebrews 10, verses 26-35: "For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment, and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, said the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions; and partly, whilst ye were made a gazing stock, both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used. For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance. Cast not away therefore your confidence which hath great recompense of reward."

Here too, in the closing part of the passage, those to whom the author of Hebrews writes are assured of the reality of their faith. He does not use such strong language to stumble any. Even the weakest babe in Christ is safe in Him. Divinely illumined these Hebrews had suffered and endured, not only individually, but they had strengthened the hands of others. Their reward was sure if they pressed firmly onward, knowing that they had a home in heaven that was eternally secure. Read carefully again verses 32-36, and remember that salvation is by grace, and reward is for service.

Then note the warning of the previous verses. The willful sin is, of course, apostasy. It is turning from Christ after having made definite acquaintance with His truth. Such deliberately trod the Son of God beneath their feet and counted His precious blood, on the basis of which God could look upon them as set aside for blessing, as a common or unholy thing, of no more value than the blood of beasts of old. What can God do with, or for, those who thus spurn His grace? They refuse His loving kindness. Therefore they must know His wrath.

These Hebrews might reason thus: 'Even if Christianity is from heaven, ye the same is true of Judaism. If we turn away from Jesus, we do not turn from God. If we reject Calvary, we can go back to the sacrifice at the Temple.' But no, "there remaineth no more [that is, no other] sacrifice for sins." God cannot own now the sacrifices of bulls and of goats since His own Son has fulfilled all the types by offering Himself without spot, a ransom for all who trust in Him. To refuse Him and to turn from His one sacrifice for sins was to expose oneself to a fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation which must destroy His enemies.

Though the majority of the company who professed to know Jesus as Saviour and Messiah were real, there was always, as today, the possibility that some were not genuine. So in chapter 12 the warning is repeated, but from a somewhat different standpoint. Note verses 15-17: "Looking diligently lest any man

fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears."

Esau is the outstanding example of one who had full knowledge of the covenant of grace, but who in the hour of stress put a higher value upon personal comfort than upon the blessing of the Lord. When awakened at last to see his folly in some measure, he wept and pleaded for the blessing he had once bargained away; but it was too late. His father had given the blessing to Jacob, and could not repent. This, as I understand it, is what is meant by the solemn words, "he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears." It is not that he himself could not repent of his former levity and profaneness; but he could not find a place of repentance in the mind of his father. However badly Jacob had acted, Isaac now knew it was the will of God that the blessing of Abraham should be given to the younger son. The lesson is a serious one. Divine things are not to be trifled with. Mercies despised at one time may be sought in vain later on. It behooves us all to be real, to be in earnest while it is called today.

"Time is earnest, passing by,

Death is earnest, drawing nigh.

Sinner, wilt thou trifling be?

Time and death appeal to thee."

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/harry-ironside/impossible-to-renew-unto-repentance/>

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