

## PERSEVERING AND FALLING AWAY: A REEXAMINATION OF HEBREWS 6:4–6

by  
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For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted the heavenly gift and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come and *yet* have fallen away, it is impossible to renew *them* again unto repentance since they crucify for themselves the Son of God and hold him up to contempt (Heb 6:4–6).<sup>1</sup>

The warning passage in Hebrews 6:4–6 continues to be a notorious crux in New Testament interpretation. The difficulty comes in harmonizing the description in vv. 4–5 of those who have “tasted the heavenly gift and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit” with the statement in v. 6 about their “falling away” and not being able to be brought back to repentance. The juxtaposition of these verses has raised a number of questions. Are the experiences predicated in vv. 4–5 tantamount to salvation, or are they describing something that approximates salvation but falls short of it? If vv. 4–5 are describing salvation, is v. 6 describing the loss of salvation? Furthermore, why does v. 6 say that it is “impossible” to restore those who fall away, or is restoration possible? And, lastly, what precisely is the danger being warned about in these verses? Are those in view being threatened with the loss of reward or with eternal condemnation, with hell itself?

The purpose of this article is to survey the views found in the commentaries and related literature on this passage<sup>2</sup> and to update the ar-

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<sup>1</sup>All translations from the Bible are the author’s own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup>The verses under discussion fall within the context of what is generally referred to as the third warning passage, or 5:11–6:8. While scholarly opinion varies somewhat as to the number of these warnings and the verses involved, five warning passages are commonly identified in Hebrews: 2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:8; 10:26–39; and 12:14–29. Furthermore, the warnings themselves are interrelated since they appear to have the same audience in view, the same underlying problem as the occasion for the warnings, and the same consequences if the warnings are not heeded. Consequently, they should not be treated in isolation, but synthetically, in order to arrive at a proper interpretation of each. On both the form and content of all five warning passages in Hebrews, see Scot

guments for the view that supports both the eternal security of the believer and the need for believers to persevere in the faith.<sup>3</sup>

### MAJOR VIEWS

The various interpretations of this passage in contemporary literature may be conveniently catalogued under four views.<sup>4</sup> The views themselves are generally distinguished according to their understanding of the spiritual status of those addressed and the nature of the warning being issued. The four views are (1) *true believer: apostasy/loss of salvation*;<sup>5</sup> (2) *true believer: apostasy/loss of reward*; (3) *true believer: hypothetical apostasy/loss of salvation*; and (4) *false believer: apostasy/eternal condemnation*. These views are briefly discussed in this section to identify their salient strengths and weaknesses and to establish a basis for a more detailed examination of the passage in the following section.

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McKnight, "The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions," *Trinity Journal* 13 (Spring 1992): 22–23.

<sup>3</sup>The doctrines of eternal security and the perseverance of the saints were among the favorite themes of Dr. William R. Rice during his forty-year tenure as the founder and senior pastor of the Inter-City Baptist Church. The great truths of God's Word, the doctrines of the faith, captured his own thinking, characterized his preaching, and contributed significantly to the success of his ministry.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Homer A. Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), pp. 111–114. Not all of the views currently championed on Heb 6 fit precisely into one of the four views treated herein. For a somewhat different listing, see McKnight, "Warning Passages," pp. 23–25. Other interpretations are addressed where appropriate in connection with the four views presented. A history of the interpretation of this passage is provided by James K. Solari, "The Problem of *Metanoia* in the Epistle to the Hebrews" (Ph.D. dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1970).

<sup>5</sup>*Apostasy* means the renunciation of the gospel by those who had previously embraced it (*New Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. "Apostasy," by I. Marshall, pp. 39–40). For further treatment, see the discussion under v. 6. *Salvation* refers to the initial aspects of individual redemption, including regeneration, justification, forgiveness, adoption, etc. Conversely, *loss of salvation* refers to the forfeiture of these items. The end for those who are saved is heaven or glorification; the end for those who are not saved is eternal condemnation and punishment. Cf. Wayne Grudem, "Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study from Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Other Warning Passages," in *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will, Volume One: Biblical and Practical Perspectives on Calvinism*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), pp. 134–137. Grudem's article appeared during the writing of the present article. He holds to the same position on Heb 6:4–6 as this author and uses many of the arguments that are found here.

### True Believer: Apostasy/Loss of Salvation

Advocates of this view interpret vv. 4–5 as describing salvation and v. 6 as describing apostasy and the loss of salvation.<sup>6</sup> This view has several strengths. First, it interprets the statements in vv. 4–5 as they are commonly understood. “Enlightened” in v. 4 is generally interpreted in a figurative sense of “instruction” or “illumination.”<sup>7</sup> “Tasting of the heavenly gift” is frequently understood as a metaphor for experiencing salvation.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, “partaking of the Holy Spirit” is often viewed as meaning “to share in the person and work of God’s Spirit.”<sup>9</sup> Second, this view interprets v. 6 as it is also commonly understood. “Fall away” is defined as apostasy, a conscious and willful rejection of Christ and the gospel. The consequence of this act is the loss of salvation, resulting in condemnation and eternal punishment.<sup>10</sup> And the construction “it is impossible to renew *them* again unto repentance” means that the subsequent condition of those who fall away is irreversible.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 150, 166–167; James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1924), pp. 76–82; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and The Epistle of James* (reprint of 1937 ed., Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966), pp. 180–181; I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1969), pp. 148–153; Grant R. Osborne, “Soteriology in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), pp. 136–141; R. McL. Wilson, *Hebrews*, New Century Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 109–113; Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermenia (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1989), pp. 166–173; William L. Lane, *Hebrews*, 2 vols., Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1991), 1:141–143; Scot McKnight, “Warning Passages,” pp. 24–25, 43–48.

Similarly, from a sacramental perspective where salvation is described in terms of membership in the Christian or new covenant community and the loss of salvation as exclusion from this community, see Hugh Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Black’s New Testament Commentaries (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1964), pp. 107–110; George Wesley Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1972), pp. 105–110.

<sup>7</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “φῶς,” by H. Conzelmann, 9:355 [hereafter cited as *TDNT*].

<sup>8</sup>*TDNT*, s.v. “γεύομαι,” by J. Behm, 1:676–677; *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, s.v. “Hunger, Taste,” by E. Tiedtke, 2:270 [hereafter cited as *NIDNTT*].

<sup>9</sup>*TDNT*, s.v. “μέτοχος,” by H. Hanse, 2:832.

<sup>10</sup>*NIDNTT*, s.v. “Fall, Fall Away,” by W. Bauder, 1:610–611; s.v. “Sin,” by W. Gunther and W. Bauder, 3:586.

<sup>11</sup>*NIDNTT*, s.v. “Might,” by O. Betz, 2:606; *TDNT*, s.v. “ἀνακαλιζέω,” by J. Behm, 3:451.

At the same time, there are several liabilities with this interpretation. The overriding problem is that it contradicts a number of passages in Scripture which argue that salvation once received cannot be lost.<sup>12</sup> In addition, proponents of this view do not offer a consistent explanation on why it is impossible to restore those who fall away.<sup>13</sup>

### True Believer: Apostasy/Loss of Reward

Proponents of this position interpret vv. 4–5 as referring to salvation and v. 6 as referring to a falling away from commitment to Christ and the gospel. What is in jeopardy for those who fall away is not the loss of salvation or eternal condemnation, but rather the loss of blessing and reward.<sup>14</sup> The extent of this falling away varies among the proponents from a simple waning in devotion to Christ to a complete rejection of the faith, to apostasy itself. In addition, the tendency among the advocates is to interpret the expression “it is impossible” in v. 6 in a relative or restricted sense. The impossibility is from the human perspective alone. In other words, it is impossible for man, but not for God, to restore those who have fallen.<sup>15</sup>

Like the preceding view, this approach has certain strengths. It takes vv. 4–5 in their frequently understood sense as describing salvation.

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<sup>12</sup>Included among these passages are John 5:24; 6:37; 10:28–30; Rom 8:1, 28–30; Eph 4:30; Phil 1:6; and, by implication, Heb 8:12. For a recent defense of eternal security in the writings of Paul, see Judith M. Gundry-Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Staying in and Falling Away* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990). Her conclusion on the security of the believer in Paul’s writings accurately reflects the position of all of Scripture on this subject.

Paul gives clear and ample evidence of his view that Christians’ salvation is certain to reach completion. This thought is integral to his understanding of individual salvation. Though threats to the consummation of Christians’ salvation may and will appear, they cannot successfully challenge it. God’s faithfulness and love make divine triumph the unquestionable outcome. For Paul, certainty of final salvation rests on God’s continued intervention to that end (p. 82).

<sup>13</sup>The explanation most often given is that apostasy, like the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt 12:31–32; Mark 3:28–30; Luke 12:10), is an unforgivable sin. E.g., Lenski, *Hebrews*, pp. 180–181. Others demur, saying that those having fallen *can* be renewed, if they will turn from their rebellion and seek God’s pardon. See the discussions in Moffatt, *Hebrews*, p. 79; and Attridge, *Hebrews*, pp. 166–172.

<sup>14</sup>Zane C. Hodges, “Hebrews,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 2 vols., ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), p. 794–796; Thomas Kem Oberholtzer, “An Analysis and Exposition of the Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews” (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1970) and, more recently, “The Thorn-Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4–12,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (July–September 1988): 319–328.

<sup>15</sup>Hodges, “Hebrews,” p. 796; Oberholtzer, “Thorn-Infested Ground,” p. 323.

Furthermore, since there is no concept of a loss of salvation with this view, it avoids the liability of the previous view. There is no conflict here with those passages in Scripture which teach eternal security.

Yet this view faces serious problems. First and foremost, the threat in the warning passages appears to be much more extensive than simply the loss of blessing and/or reward. In 4:11, the defection warned against involves a falling into judgment and a missing out on God's Sabbath rest (4:9).<sup>16</sup> The Sabbath rest that those in view are in jeopardy of missing is nothing less than heaven itself.<sup>17</sup> In 10:27, the threat is presented as "a terrifying expectation of judgment" involving a "raging fire that will consume the enemies of God."<sup>18</sup> This consuming of the enemies of God with a raging fire can hardly be a description of God's treatment of the redeemed.<sup>19</sup> The same may be said in 10:39, where those who persevere in the faith to the saving of the soul are contrasted with those who "shrink back unto destruction."<sup>20</sup> The contrast between saving the soul

<sup>16</sup>Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed., rev. and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. "πίπτω," p. 660 [hereafter cited as BAGD]; *NIDNTT*, s.v. "Fall, Fall Away," by W. Bauder, 1:611.

<sup>17</sup>Kent, *Hebrews*, pp. 84–88. This conclusion is based on three lines of evidence. First, the "Sabbath rest" is future. According to 4:9, 11, it is something that the readers have not yet entered (4:11). Second, it is called a "Sabbath" rest because it is associated with God and His "rest" in heaven (comparing 4:4 with 4:9). Third, it is the same rest that Christ entered (4:10, "the one [Christ] who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works"). This identification of the "Sabbath rest" in 4:9 still stands, even if 4:10 is referring to the believer rather than to Christ. For further support, see *TDNT*, s.v. "σαββατισμός," by E. Lohse, 7:34–35. The point is not that saved individuals may miss out on heaven, but that those who miss out on heaven do so because they are not saved.

<sup>18</sup>φοβερά δέ τις έκδοχή δρίσεως και πυρός ζήλος έσθίειν μέλλοντος τούς ύπεναντίους.

<sup>19</sup>This verse includes an allusion to the LXX of Isa 26:11 where the enemies whom God destroys are distinguished from the righteous whom God blesses. This same distinction is maintained in Heb 10:27. The parallel reference in Heb 10:30 to the Lord judging "His people" does not militate against this conclusion. The statement in 10:30 is from the LXX of Deut 32:36 (cf. Ps 134:14 [135:14]). In Deut 32, Moses recounts the history of the nation and its failures and gives a forecast of the nation's anticipated rebellion as a warning to the generation about to enter Canaan (32:44–47). The "people" in view are not the righteous but the entire nation of Israel. Both the context of Deut 32 and the critique of the nation in Heb 3:7–19 suggest that the majority of the nation at that time were unbelievers. These are the people whom God judges (cf. Deut 32:43). For further discussion, see *NIDNTT*, s.v. "Judgment," by W. Schneider, 2:365–366.

<sup>20</sup>ήμείς δέ ούκ έσμєν ύποστολής εις άπώλειαν αλλά πίστεως εις περιποίησιν ψυχής. Translating πίστεως as *persevere* in the faith is based on 10:35–36. For taking περιποίησιν as "saving," see BAGD, p. 650; *NIDNTT*, s.v. "περιποιέομαι," by E. Beyreuther, 2:839.

and destroying the soul is found elsewhere in the NT of the contrast between salvation and eternal judgment.<sup>21</sup> Finally, in 12:15, the danger warned about involves a “missing” or “being excluded”<sup>22</sup> from the grace of God.

The unmistakable impression from these combined threats is that nothing short of eternal condemnation and punishment is in view for those guilty of not heeding these warnings.<sup>23</sup> Added to this is the *a fortiori* argument employed in several of the warning passages in Hebrews comparing and contrasting the judgment of those in the OT who rejected the Law with the judgment of those in the present era who spurn the gospel (2:1–4; 10:26–31; 12:25–27).<sup>24</sup> The argument is that the judgment of those who reject the gospel is not only more certain but also more severe. The force of the logic appears compelling. Those in the OT who rejected the Law forfeited their lives and were excluded from the rest associated with entering the land of promise (3:7–19; 10:28). The more certain and severe corollary must be that those who spurn the gospel face nothing less than eternal death and exclusion from heaven.<sup>25</sup>

A second liability with this view concerns the problem that has elicited the warnings. If the problem is simply a lack of spiritual maturity or commitment, as some have suggested, then why is it “impossible,” to bring those who are guilty to repentance?<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, if the problem is that of apostasy, as others have argued, how can apostasy be describing the action of a regenerate individual?<sup>27</sup> This is particularly

<sup>21</sup>E.g., Matt 10:28, 39; 16:25–26. The noun “destruction” (ἀπώλειαν) is frequently used in the NT of eternal judgment. Cf. BAGD, p. 103; *TDNT*, s.v. “ἀπώλεια,” by A. Oepke, 1:396–397.

<sup>22</sup>BAGD, s.v. “ὑστερῶν,” p. 849; *TDNT*, s.v. “ὑστερος,” by U. Wilckens, 8:596.

<sup>23</sup>McKnight, “Warning Passages,” pp. 33–36; Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints,” pp. 151–152. For further support, see the discussion in connection with v. 6.

<sup>24</sup>Attridge, *Hebrews*, pp. 292 passim.

<sup>25</sup>McKnight, “Warning Passages,” pp. 33–36.

<sup>26</sup>Oberholtzer, “Thorn-Infested Ground,” pp. 323–324. Oberholtzer says what is impossible is others bringing the lapsed to repentance. He elsewhere states, “Since God is sovereign, . . . [He] is able to do as He pleases in human affairs,” implying that God could overrule and bring to repentance those who fall away (p. 323).

<sup>27</sup>Hodges states, “The assertion that such a failure is not possible for a regenerate person is a theological proposition which is not supported by the New Testament” (“Hebrews,” p. 795). His only defense of his own proposition is to cite 2 Tim 2:17–18 about Hymenaeus and Philetus destroying the faith of some. Oberholtzer adds 1 Tim 1:20; 5:15 to this list with the statement that these verses give examples of believers who “abandon their faith” and become subject to divine discipline (“Thorn-Infested Ground,” p. 323). It is unclear how 1 Tim 5:15 fits into this discussion. 1 Tim 1:20 mentions Hymenaeus and Alexander as those who have made shipwreck of their faith. Neither in 1 Tim 1:20 nor in 2 Tim 2:17–18 is it demonstrated that the individuals mentioned were saved to begin with.

problematic in that the author of Hebrews has specifically identified persevering in the faith as the mark of a “partaker of Christ,” that is, as the mark of a genuine believer, one who is truly saved (3:14).<sup>28</sup>

### True Believer: Hypothetical Apostasy/Loss of Salvation

Supporters of this view interpret vv. 4–5 as pointing to salvation and v. 6 as pointing to apostasy and the loss of salvation. The warning in v. 6, however, is both hypothetical and impossible. True believers could neither apostatize nor lose their salvation.<sup>29</sup> The purpose of the warning is not to suggest that such could actually happen, but rather to jar the readers from their spiritual lethargy and to spur them on to maturity.<sup>30</sup>

This view shares some of the strengths of the previous views. It takes vv. 4–5 in their commonly understood sense as describing salvation. It views the warning in v. 6 as referring to apostasy and the loss of salvation. Lastly, by understanding the warning as hypothetical *and* impossible, it avoids conflict with other verses in Scripture which teach the eternal security of the saved.

However, this interpretation encounters several difficulties. First, in order to take the warning as hypothetical, v. 6 is generally viewed as a conditional statement, “If they fall away.”<sup>31</sup> Such an interpretation may be legitimately questioned. The expression “fall away” is the fifth in a series of five parallel participles which begin in v. 4. These five participles are joined by simple conjunctions and are preceded by a single article.<sup>32</sup> While an adverbial participle can introduce the protasis of a con-

<sup>28</sup>The perfect tense of *γεγόναμεν* in 3:14 indicates that the following statement about persevering in the faith (“if we hold firmly unto the end our initial confidence”) is not a condition for becoming a partaker of Christ; rather, it is the mark of those who are already partakers. Cf. D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 88.

<sup>29</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1959), pp. 256–258, and *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1986), pp. 333–334; Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), pp. 106, 108, 111; Homer A. Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), pp. 113–114; Donald Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 144–147.

<sup>30</sup>McKnight, “Warning Passages,” p. 23.

<sup>31</sup>This interpretation takes the participle *παραπεσόντας* as conditional (RSV, NIV). Cf. Hewitt, *Hebrews*, pp. 108, 111; Guthrie, *Hebrews*, p. 143; and Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:133.

<sup>32</sup>“τούς...φωτισθέντας, γευσάμενους τε...καὶ...γενηθέντας...καὶ... γευσάμενους...καὶ παραπεσόντας.” All five of the participles are in the same tense (aorist), and all agree with the definite article that precedes them in gender, case, and number (masculine, accusative, plural).

ditional clause, such does not appear to be the case here. The first four of these five participles are invariably taken with the article as adjectival and, specifically, as substantives in a series of relative clauses (“those who have once been enlightened and have tasted...”). Because all five appear to be parallel, there is every indication that the fifth should also be taken with the article as an adjectival substantive, continuing the series of relative clauses (“and have fallen away”).<sup>33</sup> As such, it would not be adverbial and, hence, not conditional.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, advocates of this position understand “hypothetical” to mean that none of the readers had actually committed this sin.<sup>35</sup> But this explanation poses a problem as well. In the fourth warning passage, 10:26–39, the author of Hebrews warns the readers about not “forsaking” their “assembling together” (10:25).<sup>36</sup> In the following verses, he refers to the prohibited activity as a “sinning willfully” (10:26),<sup>37</sup> and identifies the consequence as the wrath of God which is meted out against His “enemies” (10:27).<sup>38</sup> Since the two warning passages are parallel, it is assumed that the warning in 6:6 about “falling away” is parallel to the “forsaking” in 10:25 and the “sinning willfully” in 10:26. Yet, according to 10:25, this forsaking is described as the “habit” of some.<sup>39</sup> In other words, the warning in these verses is in direct response to certain ones who had forsaken or abandoned the Christian community as it gathered for public worship. The point of the expression in v. 25 is that some had actually done this and were guilty of

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<sup>33</sup>Cf. NRSV.

<sup>34</sup>John A. Sproule, “Παραπεσόντας in Hebrews 6:6,” *Grace Theological Journal* 2 (Fall 1981): 327–332. See also, A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934): 1106ff. Robertson places the conditional participle (p. 1129) under the broader category of circumstantial participles (p. 1124). This category is separate and distinct from his category of attributive participles (p. 1105) under which he places all articular participles (p. 1106).

<sup>35</sup>Guthrie, *Hebrews*, p. 145.

<sup>36</sup>μη ἐγκαταλείποντες τὴν ἐπισυναγωγὴν ἑαυτῶν.

<sup>37</sup>ἐκουσίως γὰρ ἀμαρτανόντων ἡμῶν. The γὰρ in v. 26 is explanatory and indicates the close connection between the prohibition in 10:25 and the activity described in 10:26. In 10:26ff, the author of Hebrews gives the reason why the readers should not “forsake” the Christian community as it gathers for worship. Such an act involves “sinning willfully” and brings God’s judgment. Cf. Lane, *Hebrews*, 2:290–291.

<sup>38</sup>τοὺς ὑπεναντίους.

<sup>39</sup>καθὼς ἔθος τιςίν.

this sin.<sup>40</sup>

A second difficulty with this view concerns the application of the warning to the readers. The issue here is with the impossibility of the warning. How could the author of Hebrews be warning his readers about something that would be impossible for them to do? It would seem that warning the readers about something that could not actually take place robs the author's words of any real force and becomes no warning at all.<sup>41</sup> Attempts by some to show that such warnings are found elsewhere in Scripture and should not be an obstacle in the interpretation of this warning are unconvincing. The passages that have been suggested do not appear to be parallel.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Kent, a proponent of the hypothetical-impossible position, acknowledges both the reality and seriousness of what is being described in 10:25 and the connection between the activity in v.25 and the warning in vv. 26ff. However, he fails to see the implications of this for his position (*Hebrews*, pp. 202–205). For further treatment of this passage, see the discussion under v. 6.

<sup>41</sup> Roger Nicole, "Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 356; Bruce, *Hebrews*, p. 148; Grudem, "Perseverance of the Saints," p. 152. Nicole's comment is apropos, "When there is an insuperable barrier there is no need to give warning concerning dangers on the other side!"

<sup>42</sup> Kent, *Hebrews*, p. 113. Kent lists Gal 3:12, Jas 2:10, and John 9:39 as examples of hypothetical and/or impossible warnings. In response, Jas 2:10 does not appear to be parallel. James's statement about keeping the whole Law could be taken as a hypothetical/impossible warning (apparently Kent's position). Yet, the point James is making in context is not that of keeping the whole Law. The point is that were someone to break even one commandment (neither hypothetical nor impossible), that one would then be guilty of transgressing the Law (v. 11). James is not so much concerned with someone trying to keep the whole Law as he is with someone refusing to recognize that, even if only a single commandment were broken, that person would still be guilty as a transgressor. For different reasons, Gal 3:12 may also be questioned. Citing Lev 18:5, Paul does mention keeping the Law in this verse. Yet, the impossibility with this is not in one's participation in such an endeavor. Paul's argument suggests there were those who were engaged in this very effort. The impossibility comes in trying to keep the Law without faltering, that is, in keeping it perfectly with the intent of gaining eternal life. However, with Heb 6:4, what is viewed as impossible, according to Kent, is the activity itself, the *falling away*, not simply the ineffectiveness or the imperfection of such a defection. John 9:39, likewise, does not appear to be parallel. Christ says that he has come so that "those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind." The point of the verse is spiritual sight. With Christ's coming, those who were spiritually blind were given spiritual sight when they responded in faith. These not seeing were made to see. Conversely, those who claimed to have spiritual sight, but who did not respond in faith, were shown to be spiritually blind. Those thinking they had spiritual sight were shown to be spiritually blind. It is unclear what in this verse is either hypothetical or impossible.

### False Believer: Apostasy/Eternal Condemnation

Supporters of this interpretation take the statements in vv. 4–5 as depicting the experience of those who had been exposed to the gospel, who had made a profession of faith, and who had been associated with the community of believers, but who were not actually saved. Verse 6 is understood as saying that these, under pressure of persecution, reject the faith and become hardened by this act of apostasy so that there is no possibility of bringing them again to repentance. There is only the certainty of eternal condemnation and judgment.<sup>43</sup>

Like the preceding views, this approach has several strengths. Chief among them is that it interprets v. 6 in its commonly understood sense as referring to apostasy with the consequence that the guilty face condemnation and eternal judgment. Furthermore, because it interprets vv.

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<sup>43</sup>Philip E. Hughes, “Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Peril of Apostasy,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 35 (Winter 1973): 137–155, and *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 206–222; Nicole, “Some Comments,” pp. 355–364; Leon Morris, “Hebrews,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), pp. 54–57; Stanley D. Toussaint, “The Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews,” *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (Fall 1982): 67–80; Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), pp. 157–164; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 144–145; Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints,” pp. 171–173; Donald A. Hagner, *Hebrews*, *New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), pp. 92–93. A similar conclusion, though from a somewhat different perspective, is that offered by Verlyn D. Verbrugge, “Towards a New Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 15 (April 1980): 61–73. Verbrugge argues that the warning is not speaking of individuals who are in danger of falling away, but of a local Christian community. He bases his interpretation on the relationship between the illustration in Heb 6:7–8 and its alleged antecedent in Isa 5:1–7. Both, he argues, address a covenant community which fails to bring forth fruit commensurate with true repentance and is consequently judged of God. He guards against the charge that he is allowing for true believers to apostatize and to lose their salvation by saying that what is said of a community is not necessarily true of every individual in that community. The community may fall into apostasy, but the true believer would and, in fact, could not. “In other words, God’s rejection of his covenant community does not jeopardize the doctrine of election and the preservation or perseverance of the saints as it applies to the individual believer” (p. 62).

As intriguing as it is, Verbrugge’s view has gained few supporters and has been justly criticized (McKnight, “Warning Passages,” pp. 53–54; Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints,” pp. 150–151). Both the warnings themselves and the exhortations for the readers to persevere in Hebrews are addressing individuals (e.g., 3:12, “See to it, brethren, that *none of you* has an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.”). Furthermore, the link between Heb 6:7–8 and Isa 5:1–7 is less than obvious. As McKnight notes, “the agricultural illustration of Heb 6:7–8 is very common in the ancient Mediterranean world, and the parallels to Isa 5:1–7, though possible, are at best inexact and incomplete” (p. 54).

4–5 as pointing to something close to but not identical with salvation, it avoids conflict with other verses which argue for the eternal security of the saved. Those who fall and are condemned, it is argued, were never truly saved. On the other hand, the chief liability with this view, as may be anticipated, is that it gives a reading of vv. 4–5 that does not follow the frequently understood interpretation. It interprets these verses, not as referring to the saved, but to the unsaved.

### PROPOSED SOLUTION

As has been seen in this brief survey, none of the above approaches is free from difficulty. Advocates of each interpret this passage based on the larger context of Scripture and their own theological presuppositions and arrive at an interpretation that creates, for them, the least amount of tension. The same may be said of what follows. At the same time, the fourth view offers the most consistent interpretation of the verses within their own and related contexts and leaves the least number of questions unanswered. According to the fourth view, the passage refers to those who have heard the gospel, have made a profession of faith, yet are not saved. Under the pressure of persecution, these abandon the faith and are faced with eternal condemnation and judgment.<sup>44</sup> The argumentation given below is in support of the fourth view. The procedure is to examine first the interpretation of vv. 4–5, then to treat the interpretation of v. 6, the illustration in vv. 7–8, and the statements in v. 9. Elements within the other warning passages in Hebrews are discussed as appropriate in conjunction with the above verses.

#### Verses 4–5

Taken by themselves, the individual phrases in vv. 4–5 appear to identify experiences consistent with salvation, as a consensus of interpreters have endeavored to show.<sup>45</sup> If that is true of the phrases individ-

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<sup>44</sup>While all interpreters agree that the readers were experiencing persecution, not all agree with the specific circumstances involved. Fortunately, the identification of the readers and the nature of the persecution do not materially affect the debate on the interpretation of Heb 6:4–6. The position embraced here is that the readers were Jewish Christians who were being pressured because of persecution to return to the OT system of worship. For a recent discussion on these and other introductory matters, see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), pp. 668–721; D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 391–407; Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:xlvi–clvii; Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, pp. 3–85.

<sup>45</sup>The interpretation of the individual phrases in vv. 4–5 as referring to saved individuals has been discussed under the first view.

ually, then their collective force simply heightens this impression.<sup>46</sup> Added to this is the statement in v. 6 about the impossibility of renewing the lapsed “again unto repentance.” The initial impression from this statement is that the repentance in view is genuine repentance. To renew these “again” would mean that the individuals addressed had previously expressed this repentance and were thus saved.<sup>47</sup> This is all to say that the burden of proof rests on those who argue that the phrases in vv. 4–5 are describing ones who are not saved. Yet the nature of this burden must be clarified. All that really needs to be demonstrated with vv. 4–5 is that the phrases themselves are ambiguous or undetermined concerning the spiritual status of those in view.<sup>48</sup> In other words, while these phrases describe what may be *consistent* with saved individuals, the phrases themselves are not *inconsistent* with those who have made a profession of faith but who are not saved.<sup>49</sup>

*Those who have once been enlightened* (v. 4).<sup>50</sup> The term “enlightened” is used figuratively in the NT in the sense of “to reveal,” “to instruct,” “to illumine.” In the passive voice as here, it has the force of “to be instructed” or “to be illumined,” principally by God and/or His word.<sup>51</sup> It is often assumed that the expression carries a connotation

<sup>46</sup> Osborne emphatically states, “In conclusion, we must say there is no more powerful or detailed description of the true Christian in the New Testament” (“Soteriology in Hebrews,” p. 149). Even Grudem acknowledges this point, “What more could the author say to indicate a genuine experience of salvation?” (“Perseverance of the Saints,” p. 139).

<sup>47</sup>The issue raised here is discussed in connection with the interpretation of v. 6.

<sup>48</sup>The terms “ambiguous” and “undetermined” simply mean that the spiritual status of those in view cannot be identified on the basis of these expressions alone. The question must be decided from the larger context.

<sup>49</sup>Nicole, “Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4–6,” pp. 359–362; Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints,” pp. 139–150. Grudem gives an extensive treatment of these phrases, building on the works of John Owen (*An Exposition of Hebrews*, 4 vols. [reprint of 1855 ed., Marshallton, DE: National Foundation for Christian Education, 1969], 3:68–91), Nicole (“Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4–6,” pp. 355–364), and Hughes (*Hebrews*, pp. 206–222). His conclusion is that “verses 4–6 by themselves are inconclusive, for they speak of events that are experienced both by genuine Christians and by some people who participate in the fellowship of a church but are never really saved (p. 139).”

<sup>50</sup>τοὺς ἅπαξ φωτισθέντας.

<sup>51</sup>John 1:9; 1 Cor 4:5; Eph 1:18; 2 Tim 1:10; and Heb 10:32. See BAGD, p. 873. Lane provides a concise definition, “In the NT the term is used metaphorically to refer to spiritual or intellectual illumination that removes ignorance through the action of God or the preaching of the gospel” (*Hebrews*, 1:141). Beginning in the second century, the term was used to refer to Christian baptism and became popularized in that sense in the centuries following. There is no clear evidence, however, that it was used in this sense prior to the second century. Cf. Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:141.

that is either equivalent to or associated with regeneration.<sup>52</sup> This assumption is based on three reasons. First, the term and its cognates are commonly found in the NT with this sense, and there is an *a priori* likelihood that it carries this same meaning here.<sup>53</sup> Second, the adverb “once” which modifies enlightened suggests a decisive, once-for-all act consistent with the initial hearing and responding to the gospel.<sup>54</sup> Third, the only other use of enlightened by the author is in 10:32. There it identifies the readers as saved individuals and that argues for a similar understanding in this passage.<sup>55</sup>

The cumulative weight of these arguments is impressive, yet the evidence is capable of a different analysis and conclusion. While the cognate forms of the verb enlighten are used where the meaning is associated with regeneration, it is questionable whether the verb itself is ever used in this sense.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, there are clear examples in the NT where this word cannot refer to regeneration. For example, John 1:9 refers to Christ as the true light who “enlightens every man.”<sup>57</sup> Assuming “every man” means all humanity, enlightens cannot mean regenerates. Second, the modifier once can suggest something of a decisive, once-for-all event consistent with regeneration. However, it can also be used where the idea is “initially” or “at the first” in sequence with a subsequent activity, and not carry the idea of once for all.<sup>58</sup> The use of the adverb “again” in v. 6 argues for the meaning of “at the first” in v.

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<sup>52</sup>E.g., Osborne, “Soteriology in Hebrews,” p. 149; Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 169; Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:141; McKnight, “Warning Passages,” p. 46.

<sup>53</sup>McKnight, “Warning Passages,” pp. 45–46.

<sup>54</sup>Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:132; similarly Bruce, *Hebrews*, pp. 145–146.

<sup>55</sup>Hodges, “Hebrews,” p. 794; Oberholtzer, “Thorn-Infested Ground,” p. 321.

<sup>56</sup>Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints,” pp. 141–143. Grudem concedes that the cognate noun φωτισμός is used in the sense of conversion (e.g., 2 Cor 4:4–6). He rejects the idea, however, that the verb itself is ever employed with this meaning in the NT. The verb is used eleven times in the NT, primarily as a metaphor for imparting or receiving knowledge, instruction. Only in Eph 1:18 can a case be made for the meaning of conversion. However, even here its meaning is debated. Lincoln, for example, argues that it refers to the conversion of the readers (*Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary [Dallas: Word Books, 1990], p. 58). Bruce, on the other hand, sees a reference here to the instruction of those who are already saved (*The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984], p. 270).

<sup>57</sup>See also 1 Cor 4:5.

<sup>58</sup>BAGD, p. 80. In 10:2, the adverb ἅπαξ carries the idea of once for all, but in 9:7; 12:26, 27 it does not.

4.<sup>59</sup> The thought would be that it is impossible for those who *initially* or *at the first* were enlightened and who subsequently fell away to be brought back *again* to repentance. Lastly, what is often used as the critical text, 10:32, is not as decisive as some have suggested. The expression in 10:32, “after having been enlightened,” is parallel with the expression in 10:26, “after having received a knowledge of the truth.” There is no indication in the latter that receiving a knowledge of the truth suggests the idea of regeneration. It simply means that the readers had been taught or instructed in the truth of God’s Word. The same may be said of the expression in 10:32.<sup>60</sup> The point of all of this is that the evidence for taking enlightened to mean either regenerated or simply instructed is inconclusive. In terms of probability, the evidence favors the concept of instructed rather than regenerated.

*And have tasted the heavenly gift* (v. 4).<sup>61</sup> Similar to the previous construction, this clause and its counterpart in v. 5 (“and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come”) are commonly interpreted as synonyms for salvation.<sup>62</sup> Thus, “to taste the heavenly gift” means “to participate in the gospel and its attendant blessings.”<sup>63</sup> Support for this interpretation is based on two arguments. The first is that the word taste, used metaphorically, does not mean simply to sample something but to experience something and to experience it fully.<sup>64</sup> Its only other use in Hebrews is in 2:9, where it describes Christ tasting death for every man. Clearly, the meaning there is “to experience fully,”

<sup>59</sup>ἄπαξ...πάλιν. See Attridge, *Hebrews*, pp. 169–170; Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, p. 319.

<sup>60</sup>Hughes, *Hebrews*, p. 207; Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints,” pp. 141, 176–177.

<sup>61</sup>γευσάμενους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουτανίου. The use of τε...καὶ...καὶ...καὶ and the precise relationship among the participial clauses in vv. 4–6 has been variously understood. Because the sequence of conjunctions allows for the clauses to be coordinate, that is the understanding here. Cf. BAGD, p. 807; Westcott, *Hebrews*, pp. 147–148; Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 167. In any case, the differences are minimal and do not materially affect the issues addressed in this discussion.

<sup>62</sup>See, for example, Osborne, “Soteriology in Hebrews,” p. 149. The expressions in v. 5 are discussed later.

<sup>63</sup>Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:141.

<sup>64</sup>Moffatt, *Hebrews*, p. 78; Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, p. 320. Some see eucharistic overtones with the use of the verb here, especially those who identify “enlightened” in the previous clause with baptism (e.g., Bruce, *Hebrews*, p. 146). The majority, however, rightly reject such overtones. Hughes, for example, notes that if the eucharist were in view, a literal meaning for the verb would be required, whereas the context clearly argues for a metaphorical sense (*Hebrews*, pp. 208–209).

and that is its meaning here as well.<sup>65</sup> The second argument is that the heavenly gift is a reference to the gospel and/or its related blessings.<sup>66</sup> The word gift is used in the NT of Christ (John 4:10), the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; 8:20; 10:45; 11:17), and justification/salvation (Rom 5:15, 17). Thus, to taste any of these could only be said of one who is saved.

The evidence, however, is capable of a different interpretation that does not support the above conclusions. It must be granted that the figurative use of taste carries with it the idea of to experience.<sup>67</sup> As mentioned with reference to Hebrews 2:9, Christ is said to taste death for every man. Without question, for Christ to taste death meant that he experienced death. In addition, every such tasting, as in 2:9, involves a real or genuine experience. Consequently, tasting the heavenly gift in v. 4 must mean that these genuinely experienced this gift. Having said that, whether it is used literally as in Matthew 27:34 of Christ tasting wine while on the cross or figuratively as in Hebrews 2:9, the term taste involves an experience that could be momentary, temporary, or continuing. Christ's tasting death for every man was an experience that did not continue indefinitely. It took place within a specific period of time. Furthermore, while every figurative use of taste in the NT involves a genuine experience, not every use involves a saving experience.<sup>68</sup> In other words, there is a sense in which everyone experiences the grace and goodness of God. At the same time, many who taste God's goodness do not continue in that experience nor does that experience constitute salvation.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, the questions in v. 4 are not whether taste means experience or whether the experience was real. Rather, the questions

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<sup>65</sup>Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, p. 137; McKnight, "Warning Passages," pp. 46–47. Based on the use of γεύομαι with the genitive here in v. 4 and with the accusative in v. 5, some have suggested that the tasting in v. 4 is partial (e.g., Westcott, *Hebrews*, p. 149; Montefiore, *Hebrews*, p. 109; Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 170). However, most reject this distinction and see the change between the genitive and accusative in these verses as primarily stylistic (e.g., Moffatt, *Hebrews*, p. 78; Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, p. 320).

<sup>66</sup>Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 170.

<sup>67</sup>*TDNT*, s.v. "γεύομαι," by J. Behm, 1:676–677. BAGD lists "to come to know something; to partake of; to experience" for the figurative uses (p. 157).

<sup>68</sup>Grudem, "Perseverance of the Saints," pp. 145–146. His argument is based primarily on the uses of γεύομαι in extra-biblical literature of this same period. The figurative uses of γεύομαι in the NT where the object involves some divine provision are limited to this passage and 1 Pet 2:3. In 1 Pet 2:3 the object of γεύομαι is "that the Lord is good" (ὅτι χρηστός ὁ κύριος). While χρηστός in 1 Pet 2:3 does appear to refer to the *saving* goodness of God, that does not prove that γεύομαι carries this sense. This meaning of 1 Pet 2:3 is based on the use of χρηστός, not γεύομαι.

<sup>69</sup>E.g., Matt 5:45; Acts 17:25; Titus 2:12.

concern the extent of the experience and its efficacy for salvation. Since this same word may involve one or the other of these nuances, the word itself cannot determine whether those in view are saved or not.

Furthermore, the object “heavenly gift” is not determinative in deciding these issues either. It is true that the term gift is used of God’s saving grace in salvation, but the term has a number of other uses in the NT. A good case could be made that it refers to the Holy Spirit.<sup>70</sup> The Holy Spirit is described as a gift (Acts 2:38) and as one that comes from heaven (1 Pet 1:12). Assuming for the moment this identification in v. 4 is correct, tasting the Holy Spirit does not equate with experiencing salvation. According to John 16:8, the Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin, yet the whole world is not saved as a result of this activity. Moreover, according to Acts 7:51, this convicting ministry is something that humanity can resist, including lost humanity. The problem is that the exact expression used in v. 4, “the heavenly gift,” is not found elsewhere in the NT. This being the case, the meaning of the expression is subject to more than one possibility. Because the options do not equal a saving experience in each case, the phrase cannot prove the spiritual status of those in view.

*And have become partakers of the Holy Spirit.*<sup>71</sup> As with the previous constructions, many argue that this clause refers to the regenerating or indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit.<sup>72</sup> This interpretation is based on similar uses in Hebrews of constructions with “partake.” The most frequently mentioned example is in 3:14. There the expression “partakers of Christ” is found where the construction clearly refers to those who are saved, those who partake of Christ’s saving activity. Thus, the corresponding phrase “partakers of God’s Spirit” in v. 4 must have a similar sense.<sup>73</sup> To partake of the Holy Spirit means to participate in the saving ministry of God’s Spirit.

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<sup>70</sup>Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, p. 320; Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints,” p. 146. The Holy Spirit is identified as the antecedent simply for the sake of the argument. Since the Holy Spirit is specifically mentioned in the following verse, some other aspect of divine provision may be in view. See Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, p. 137. Assuming that the clauses in these two verses are synthetic rather than synonymous, the broader concepts of God’s *grace* or God’s *provisions* could be intended.

<sup>71</sup>καὶ μετόχους γενηθέντας πνεύματος ἁγίου.

<sup>72</sup>Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, p. 138; Osborne, “Soteriology in Hebrews,” p. 149; Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 170; Lane, *Hebrews*, p. 141. Those who interpret the preceding two clauses as conceptually linked to baptism and the eucharist suggest a similar link between this clause and the reference to the laying on of hands mentioned in 6:2. See the discussion in Hughes, *Hebrews*, pp. 208–210.

<sup>73</sup>McKnight, “Warning Passages,” p. 47.

This is perhaps the most difficult statement in vv. 4–5 to counter. There are several cross references in Hebrews where the expression partakers is used of the saved. As was just mentioned, in 3:14 the author of Hebrews states that those who have become partakers of Christ are those who persevere in the faith.<sup>74</sup> It is difficult to see from this verse how “partakers of Christ” could be describing other than those who are saved.<sup>75</sup> The same may be said of 3:1 and 12:8. It could be argued in 3:1 that the “heavenly calling” of which the readers are partakers is the call of God unto salvation.<sup>76</sup> This reference to the readers’ calling in 3:1 is preceded by the parallel description of the readers as “holy brethren,” a common designation in the NT for the saved.<sup>77</sup> In 12:8 the discipline of which all are “partakers” is the discipline that God administers to his children, to the saved.<sup>78</sup> According to this same verse, not to partake of this discipline means that one is not God’s child. Conversely, to be a partaker of this discipline is an indication that one is a true child, that one is saved.

Despite all this, the expression partakers does not prove that those in view are saved. In each case, the context, and not the word itself, must argue for such an understanding.<sup>79</sup> The term partake means “to share in something,” often with others, hence, “to be a partner, a companion.”<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, the degree of involvement in this sharing may vary from a loose association to a more direct and personal participation.<sup>81</sup> Only the context can indicate the nature of the sharing and the spiritual condition of those involved.<sup>82</sup> For example, many argue that “partakers of a heavenly calling” in 3:1 refers to the saved. This understanding is based on

<sup>74</sup>Literally, “hold firm to the end the confidence we had at the beginning” (ἐάνπερ τὴν ἀρχὴν τῆς ὑποστάσεως μέχρι τέλους βεβαίαν κατὰσχῶμεν).

<sup>75</sup>This is based on the larger context of the NT where similar concepts are used to describe the saved. E.g., 1 John 5:11–12.

<sup>76</sup>κλήσεως ἐπουρανίου μέτοχοι.

<sup>77</sup>ἀδελφοὶ ἅγιοι. Cf. *TDNT*, s.v. “ἀδελφός,” by H. von Soden, 1:145–146.

<sup>78</sup>ἡς μέτοχοι γεγονάσιν πάντες.

<sup>79</sup>Carson provides a salutary reminder of this principle (*Exegetical Fallacies*, pp. 25–66).

<sup>80</sup>BAGD, p. 514; *TDNT*, s.v. “μέτοχος,” by H. Hanse, 2:830–832.

<sup>81</sup>Nicole, “Hebrews 6:4–6,” p. 360; Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, p. 321; Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints,” p. 147.

<sup>82</sup>It is used in Luke 5:7, for example, of those who were companions with Peter and the disciples in the task of fishing. Here, the idea is probably fellow fishermen. In the LXX, it is used of those who are companions with God-fearers (Ps 118:63 [119:63]), as well as of those who are companions with idolaters (Hos 4:17).

the preceding expression “holy brethren,” a common designation in the NT for the saved. However, a case could be made that “partakers of a heavenly calling” does not equal salvation. Assuming that the calling in 3:1 is the calling of God through the gospel,<sup>83</sup> not all who hear this call respond, and not all who respond, respond with saving faith.<sup>84</sup> Thus, “partakers of a heavenly calling” could refer to those who have heard the gospel, but who have not responded in saving faith.

The same may be said of the expression in Hebrews 6:4. To be partakers of the Holy Spirit could mean to share in his saving activity.<sup>85</sup> But, it could also refer to participating in some non-salvific activity. This may include a sharing in the general convicting ministry of God’s Spirit, as was argued earlier, or being the beneficiary of the Spirit’s miraculous gifts, or simply observing these gifts as exercised by others.<sup>86</sup> Again, the expression is open to several interpretations, some of which do not require that those so described are saved. All that can be said with certainty is that those in view share in some way in the Spirit’s ministry.

*And have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come* (v. 5).<sup>87</sup> The expression “tasted” is the same word previously discussed

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<sup>83</sup>BAGD, pp. 435–436; *TDNT*, s.v. “κλήσις,” by K. Schmidt, 3:491–493; *NIDNTT*, s.v. “Call,” by L. Coenen, 1:273–276. Theologians frequently distinguish between the general calling of God and the effectual calling of God. Both are accomplished in conjunction with the gospel, but the former does not invariably lead to salvation whereas the latter does (*New Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. “Calling,” by R. Letham, pp. 119–120). It is the general calling of God that is argued for Heb 3:1.

<sup>84</sup> See, for example, 2 Pet 1:10 where Peter exhorts his readers to “make sure of your calling and election.” The exhortation directs his readers to demonstrate by the acquisition of the spiritual characteristics previously enumerated (vv. 5–7) that they had responded properly to the divine call and were indeed numbered among the chosen of God (vv. 8–9). See also the cognate expression in Matt 22:14, “many are called, but few are chosen.” The same may be said of Heb 12:8. Experiencing divine chastisement is not the sole domain of the redeemed. On occasion, unbelievers are subject to divine chastisement as well. This was certainly true of the nation of Israel during its sojourn in the wilderness, where the majority were unbelievers (Heb 3:16–19). The point in 12:8 is that believers *invariably* experience God’s hand of discipline. To be without divine chastisement is to be without the necessary mark of divine sonship. Conversely, to experience divine chastisement is not an invariable proof of sonship.

<sup>85</sup>Similarly, Rom 8:9.

<sup>86</sup>Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints,” pp. 147–148. A number of commentaries interpret the expression as referring to spiritual gifts, whether this included the actual exercising of such or simply benefiting from or observing these gifts as exercised by others. E.g., Hughes, *Hebrews*, p. 210; Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, p. 159; Bruce, *Hebrews*, pp. 146–147. Bruce suggests a possible parallel with Simon Magus (Acts 8:9–24), whom he describes as one who heard the gospel, responded to it, was baptized, witnessed the exercising of spiritual gifts, but who was later shown not to be saved.

<sup>87</sup>καὶ καλὸν γευσάμενους θεοῦ ῥῆμα δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος. An alternate rendering, suggested by C. F. D. Moule and others, and followed by the NIV, is to take καλὸν, etc., as a substantival clause and translate it “tasted the goodness of the

in v. 4 (“tasted the heavenly gift”). What must be determined in this verse is the identification of the “word of God” and the “powers of the age to come” and whether those tasting these are saved or not. The word of God is generally understood to refer to divine revelation, whether spoken or written, and specifically to the gospel.<sup>88</sup> Likewise, the powers of the age to come is taken either as a reference to salvation<sup>89</sup> or, much more frequently, to the miracles that accompanied and validated the apostolic proclamation of the gospel in the early church.<sup>90</sup> In fact, the majority of commentaries see a parallel with 2:1–4, where a similar sequence is found of hearing the gospel and of witnessing the miracles that accompanied its proclamation.<sup>91</sup>

The evidence weighs in favor of the majority in seeing the same sequence in v. 5 as in 2:1–4. First, the author of Hebrews uses the phrase “word of God” in connection with God’s activity in creating the universe (11:3), in giving revelation at Sinai (12:19), and in communicating the gospel through the Son (cf. 1:1–2, “God...has spoken to us through *His* Son,” and 2:3, “so great a salvation...spoken by the Lord”).<sup>92</sup> Of these possibilities, the parallel expressions in Hebrews argue for taking the word of God in v. 5 as referring specifically to the gospel. In 4:12, “the word of God” has in view the “good news” proclaimed by Christ and the apostles (4:2). In 13:7, “the word of God” refers to the preaching ministry of church leaders. In 6:1, the expression “word of Christ” is employed of the gospel. The predominant meaning of this and related phrases in Hebrews is the gospel, and that appears to be its meaning

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Word of God” (*An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959], p. 36). Cf. Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:133. Bruce prefers calling it a predicate use of the adjective, though arriving at the same translation (*Hebrews*, p. 147). The translation above takes *καλόν* as attributive, modifying the neuter noun *ῥῆμα*. The differences are minimal for the present discussion. The adjective signifies that which is excellent or blameless (BAGD, p. 400).

<sup>88</sup>*TDNT*, s.v. “λέγω,” by G. Kittel, 4:113–119; *NIDNTT*, s.v. “Word,” by O. Betz, 3:1121–1123.

<sup>89</sup>Lenski, *Hebrews*, p. 184; Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, p. 138. Marshall states that these powers “are unlikely to be miracles” but does not offer any evidence to support his statement or explain why it is so.

<sup>90</sup>*TDNT*, s.v. “δύναμις,” by W. Grundmann, 2:310–315; Bruce, *Hebrews*, p. 147.

<sup>91</sup>E.g., Hughes, *Hebrews*, p. 211; Bruce, *Hebrews*, p. 147; Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 170; Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:141; Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, p. 321.

<sup>92</sup>While some make a distinction between *λόγος* in 2:2 and *ῥῆμα* in 6:5 (e.g., Westcott, *Hebrews*, p. 149), the majority of commentaries argue for synonymy (e.g., Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, p. 321).

here. It is the gospel that was first proclaimed by Christ (2:3) and then by the apostles and others (2:3; 13:7).<sup>93</sup>

Second, the plural term “powers” is regularly used of miracles in the NT.<sup>94</sup> This is the unanimous translation of the word in 2:4,<sup>95</sup> the only other use of the plural in Hebrews, and this is the likely meaning for the plural in v. 5. In addition, to describe these powers as belonging to the age to come means that the miracles that will characterize the eschaton were being experienced in connection with the apostolic preaching of the gospel.<sup>96</sup> According to 2:3–4, these miracles served as a witness and confirmation to the truth of the gospel.<sup>97</sup> All of this leads to the conclusion that the “Word of God and the powers of the age to come” in v. 5 refer to the proclamation of the gospel and the miracles accompanying that proclamation.

The question still remains whether those who have tasted the word of God and the miracles accompanying it can be other than saved. To say that someone has tasted or experienced the gospel could be another way of saying that they were saved.<sup>98</sup> Yet, as was mentioned earlier, not everyone who has experienced or been exposed to the gospel has responded positively to it. Neither has everyone who has responded positively to it responded in saving faith and experienced salvation. A number of examples in the NT support this. Simon Magus, for example, heard the gospel, assented to it, received baptism, and observed many miracles.<sup>99</sup> However, when he sought to purchase the ability to impart the Spirit through the laying on of hands, Peter denounced him in terms that show he was unsaved.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, many others who witnessed

<sup>93</sup>In these passages, λόγος is used rather than ῥῆμα.

<sup>94</sup>BAGD, s.v. “δύναμις,” p. 208.

<sup>95</sup>KJV, RSV, NASB, NIV, et al.

<sup>96</sup>The expression “age to come” (μέλλοντος αἰῶνος) refers to the age following Christ’s return and, specifically, to His millennial reign or kingdom. The construction μέλλον αἰών has this meaning in Matt 12:32 and Eph 1:21. The parallel construction ἐρχόμενος αἰῶνος has this meaning in Mark 10:30 and Luke 18:30. In Heb 2:5, the similar construction τὴν οἰκουμένην τὴν μέλλουσαν is found with the same sense. Furthermore, the author of Hebrews refers to the future return of Christ (1:6; 9:28; 12:14) as well as to a future kingdom (12:28; 13:14 [“the city which is to come”). It is to these that the expression “age to come” points. For the association between miracles in the NT and their relationship to the future age, see Matt 12:28.

<sup>97</sup>Cf. Mark 16:20 for a similar statement.

<sup>98</sup>Again, this appears to be the sense of 1 Pet 2:3. Cf. Titus 3:3–6.

<sup>99</sup>Acts 8:9–24.

<sup>100</sup>Note particularly v. 21, “you have no part nor share in this matter, because your heart is not right before God.” The same may be said of those passages in the gospels which describe individuals who hear the gospel, respond to it, follow Jesus, but later turn away from Him (cf. John 6:60–66 [note, especially, v. 64]). This also is supported by the

miracles in the NT, both in the Gospels and in Acts, were not saved. In addition, not everyone who performed miracles was saved. For example, Jesus said of those who perform miracles in His name without submitting to the Father's will, "I never knew you, depart from me you evildoers."<sup>101</sup> The expression in v. 5, therefore, is equivocal. It can refer to both the saved as well as the unsaved.

As was mentioned earlier, the burden of proof for the fourth view rests on showing that the statements in vv. 4–5 can describe other than the saved. The discussion above has demonstrated the viability of such an interpretation. The statements could refer to those who are saved. But they can also depict those who have heard and understood the gospel and have even consented to it, have experienced the grace of God and the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit, have witnessed miracles, but who have never responded in saving faith and are therefore not saved. Thus, it may be concluded that the phrases themselves are inconclusive. They cannot identify the spiritual status of those in view apart from the larger context.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, what is true of the phrases individually is also true of their collective force. If the individual statements are ambiguous in this sense, then they are collectively ambiguous as well. The decision about the spiritual status of those in view must be based on evidence from the wider context, particularly from the verses that follow.<sup>103</sup>

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parable of the sower in Matt 13:3–9 (cf. Mark 4:3–20; Luke 8:4–15). Of the four groups depicted in this parable, at least three of the four respond to the gospel but only the last gives evidence of salvation (vv. 18–23). See D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:312–315.

<sup>101</sup>Matt 7:22–23.

<sup>102</sup>There is one statement from the other warning passages that needs to be included in this discussion. In 10:29, the warning describes those in view as "sanctified" by the blood of the covenant (ἐν ᾧ ἡγιασθη). The majority of interpreters understand "sanctified" in this verse to mean "cleansed, forgiven" and as equivalent to "saved." See, for example, McKnight, "Warning Passages," p. 43. It must be acknowledged that the verb is frequently used in Hebrews to describe those who are saved. This is true of its other two uses in the same chapter (10:10, 14). However, the term can also mean "to treat as holy" or "to associate with what is holy" where salvation is not in view (BAGD, s.v. "ἡγιασθῶ," pp. 8–9). The former may be the meaning in Heb 13:12, where the purpose of Christ's death is to sanctify the "people," the entire nation (note also 9:13). The latter is certainly its use in 1 Cor 7:14, where it refers to unbelieving children as "sanctified" by a believing parent. Either of these options could be applied to 10:29 without requiring those in view to be saved. See the discussion in Grudem, "Perseverance of the Saints," pp. 177–178.

<sup>103</sup>"Words derive their specific sense (within a possible range) from the context, and, among the possible meanings (those that have been attested elsewhere), there is no such thing as a 'more likely' meaning for a term apart from its context. In this case, the most relevant context includes the author's continuation of this discussion in verses 7–12" (Grudem, "Perseverance of the Saints," p. 152).

### Verse 6

According to the fourth view, v. 6 depicts the apostasy of those who professed faith, but who were not saved. Furthermore, this apostasy is an irremediable act which exposes the guilty to the unmitigated wrath of divine judgment. Several questions with this verse need to be addressed in defense of the fourth view. The first is whether “fall away” means apostasy.<sup>104</sup> The second is whether the expression “bring again to repentance” means that these had previously exercised repentance and were saved. The third is whether the term “impossible” (v. 4) describes an irremediable act, and, if so, why is it irremediable?<sup>105</sup>

*And have fallen away.*<sup>106</sup> The term “fallen away,” found only here in the NT, is by itself somewhat ambiguous.<sup>107</sup> However, its use in the LXX, the parallel expressions in the other warning passages, and the descriptive phrases accompanying it here and elsewhere in Hebrews lead inevitably to the conclusion that the sin of apostasy is meant.<sup>108</sup> In the

<sup>104</sup>The debate on this passage is not over the definition of apostasy. The debate is whether apostasy is in view and, if so, who can commit such. For a definition, see note 5 above.

<sup>105</sup>This expression is treated here rather than at v. 4 because of its conceptual and grammatical links with the clauses in v. 6. There is general consensus on the syntax of this passage. The conjunction “for” (postpositive γάρ) in v. 4 is connected either with vv. 1–3a, giving the reason why the readers must go on to maturity (because failure to do so would open them to further regression and perhaps even apostasy) or with v. 3b, clarifying what God does not permit (renewing those who fall away). The verbal adjective “impossible” (ἀδύνατον) is taken as a predicate adjective, with an impersonal subject added by ellipsis, and governs the infinitive “to renew” (ἀνακαινίζειν). The infinitive, used transitively and without a specific subject, has the five aorist participles in vv. 4–6a as its objects. The two present participles in v. 6 are causal, modifying the predicate and answering the question why is it “impossible.” See the discussion in Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 167 and McKnight, “Warning Passages,” p. 40. For alternatives, see P. Proulx and L. Alonso Schokel, “Heb 6, 4–6: εἰς μετάνοιαν ἀνασταυροῦντας,” *Biblica* 56 (1975): 193–203 and L. Sabourin, “Crucifying Afresh for One’s Repentance’ (Heb 6:4–6),” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 6 (October 1976): 264–271. Hagner’s critique of the alternatives is apropos, “attempts to avoid the difficulty of the verse by assuming a transposition of words and different punctuation... is a drastic and unconvincing expedient” (*Hebrews*, p. 95).

<sup>106</sup>καὶ παραπεσόντας.

<sup>107</sup>It is ambiguous in the sense that the expression is not a technical term for apostasy, as seen by its use outside the Bible and in the LXX (BAGD, p. 621).

<sup>108</sup>This is clearly the consensus among the commentaries. See the listings in Bruce, *Hebrews*, pp. 147–148.

LXX, this term is used to translate several Hebrew expressions for sin, often in contexts involving gross unfaithfulness or spiritual adultery.<sup>109</sup> The same is true of the parallel expression in 3:12, translated “falling away.”<sup>110</sup> It too is employed both in the OT and in the NT in the sense of “to come to reject,” “to commit apostasy.”<sup>111</sup> This definition for the expression in v. 6 is further supported by the use of “sinning willfully” in the parallel warning in 10:26. The sin in 10:26 is “willful” because it involves a deliberate act.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, according to the same verse, it is committed by one who has “received a knowledge of the truth.” Moreover, its OT use suggests that this sin is equivalent to sinning “defiantly,” not just a conscious violation of God’s Law but a thorough and deliberate repudiation of divine revelation.<sup>113</sup>

In addition, the accompanying phrases both here and elsewhere in Hebrews are best understood in light of this definition. Those falling away in 3:12 are described as having an “evil, unbelieving heart.”<sup>114</sup> In 6:6, they are said to be guilty of “crucifying for themselves the Son of God” and “holding *Him* up to contempt.”<sup>115</sup> These last two statements seem particularly apt for those who have been enlightened by the gospel

<sup>109</sup>Frequently with an intensifying cognate accusative. Cf. Ezek 14:13; 15:8; 18:24; 20:27; 22:4; Wis 6:9; 12:2. *TDNT*, s.v. “παραπίπτω,” by W. Michaelis, pp. 170–171.

<sup>110</sup>ἐν τῷ ἀποστῆναι.

<sup>111</sup>BAGD, pp. 126–127; *TDNT*, s.v. “ἀπίστημι,” by H. Schlier, 1:513; *NIDNTT*, s.v. “Fall, Fall Away,” by W. Bauder, 1:607–608.

<sup>112</sup>*TDNT*, s.v. “ἐκούσιος,” by F. Hauck, 2:470.

<sup>113</sup>Most commentaries connect the sin here with Num 15:22–31 where the distinction is made between the so-called “unintentional” sin (LXX ἀκουσίως) and the “defiant” sin (LXX ἐν χειρὶ ὑπερηφανίας [“with a proud or arrogant hand”]). E.g., Lane, *Hebrews*, 2:291–293. It is best to interpret the defiant sin in Num 15 as apostasy. This sin is not simply intentional, but defiant (LXX ὑπερηφανίας; MT הַיָּד הַגְּדֹלָה [from גָּדַל]). It involves blasphemy against God (v. 30) and hatred of God’s Word (v. 31). Furthermore, the one guilty is cut off from the nation (v. 30–31), with no hope of forgiveness (v. 31; cf. Heb 10:26, “no sacrifice for sins”).

<sup>114</sup>Note also 3:17–19. The warning in 3:12 is based on the actions of apostate Israel who rejected God’s promises and were prevented from entering God’s rest.

<sup>115</sup>The debate over whether to translate ἀνασταυροῦντας as “crucify” (NASB) or “crucify again” (NIV) is not germane to the discussion. Cf. Bruce, *Hebrews*, p. 138. The reflexive pronoun “for themselves” (ἐαυτοῖς) may be taken either as an ethical dative (Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 171) or as a dative of disadvantage (Lane, *Hebrews*, p. 133; Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, pp. 324–325). The expression “holding *Him* up to contempt” (παραδειγματίζοντας) is used of public executions which exposes the victim to humiliation and serves as a warning to others (e.g., Num 25:4 [LXX]). Cf. *TDNT*, s.v. “παραδειγματίζω,” by H. Schlier; Bruce, *Hebrews*, p. 149.

but who disdain its message. By such an act, they have placed themselves in the same company as those who rejected the claims of Christ and nailed Him to the cross. The same may be said of the expressions in 10:29, “trampled the Son of God,” “regarded the blood of the covenant as common,” and “insulted the Spirit of Grace.”<sup>116</sup> The author of Hebrews intentionally employs highly emotive phrases to communicate the magnitude involved in knowingly and deliberately spurning the grace of God in the gospel of Christ. The combined weight of all of this leads inexorably to the conclusion that the sin in these verses is apostasy.<sup>117</sup> It is the premeditated act of one who has been exposed to the gospel, has understood it and even agreed with it for a period of time, but who ultimately has come to reject it.

*To renew again unto repentance.*<sup>118</sup> The question raised with this clause is whether “repentance” means true repentance and whether those in view were thus saved.<sup>119</sup> The tension with the fourth view which says these were not saved is, why would it be desirable to restore these to repentance, if it were not true repentance? Without question, Scripture speaks of a repentance that leads to salvation.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, true repentance and saving faith are corollaries. They are identified individually and collectively as the sole conditions for salvation.<sup>121</sup> At the same time,

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<sup>116</sup>The expression “trampled” (καταπατήσας), used here in a figurative sense, means to treat something with contempt (BAGD, p. 415). The same may be said of the expression “insulted” (ἐνυβρίσας, BAGD, p. 270). The “blood of the covenant” refers to Christ’s sacrificial death in connection with the new covenant (Heb 9:11–22). By treating the blood of Christ as “common” (κοινόν), these were saying that Christ’s death was ordinary in the sense that it had no soteriological efficacy (Lane, *Hebrews*, pp. 294–295).

<sup>117</sup>McKnight, “Warning Passages,” pp. 36–43.

<sup>118</sup>πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν εἰς μετάνοιαν.

<sup>119</sup>The infinitive ἀνακαινίζειν means “to renew” or “to restore” (BAGD, p. 55). The entire construction with the adverb πάλιν and the prepositional phrase εἰς μετάνοιαν means to bring (someone) back to repentance. The implication from this is that those in vv. 4–6 had previously been brought to repentance; they had previously repented.

<sup>120</sup>E.g., Acts 11:18; 2 Cor 7:10. Repentance is defined as a change of mind concerning personal sin and guilt, which may be accompanied by remorse and/or sorrow. Several argue that repentance is often used in the NT as a synonym for conversion. Cf. *TDNT*, s.v. “μετανοέω, μετάνοια,” by J. Behm, 4:999–1006; *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. “Repentance,” by C. Kromminga, p. 396.

<sup>121</sup>E.g., Luke 5:20; 24:47; Acts 3:19; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38–39; 16:31; 20:21; 26:18.

Scripture also speaks of a repentance that does not lead to salvation.<sup>122</sup> In other words, just as there is a faith that does not save, so there is a repentance that does not save.<sup>123</sup> This is certainly the case with the repentance exercised by Esau in Hebrews 12:17 and Judas in Matthew 27:3.<sup>124</sup> The question in v. 6 is, which kind of repentance is in view? Since either is a possibility, the answer must be based on the larger context. As previously argued, the sin in these verses is apostasy. It is the sin of those who made a profession of faith in Christ but who later repudiated Christ. In addition, the threat in the warning passages is the threat of eternal condemnation and punishment. It points to God's judgment of the lost, not of the saved. Lastly, the Scriptures teach the eternal security of those who are saved. Salvation once gained cannot be lost. In light of this, the repentance which those in Hebrews 6:6 had previously exercised was a repentance that did not lead to salvation.<sup>125</sup> The question remains, why, if that is the case, is it desirable to bring the lapsed back to this repentance, assuming that were possible. The answer is that the repentance in Hebrews 6:6 would involve conviction of sin and could be the foundation upon which the Spirit of God would work true repentance.

*For it is impossible* (v. 4).<sup>126</sup> Opinion is divided whether “impossible” is to be taken in a relative sense (impossible for man but not for God) or in an absolute sense (impossible for God or for anyone).<sup>127</sup> Several lines of evidence point to the second of these two being

<sup>122</sup>The implication from Acts 11:18 and 2 Cor 7:10 is that there is a repentance that does not lead to salvation.

<sup>123</sup>For a reference in the NT to a faith that does not save, see Jas 2:14–20. In v. 14, James asks a rhetorical question, “can that faith save him” (μη δύναται ἡ πίστις σώσαι αὐτόν)? The faith in view, from this verse, is a faith without works. The construction James uses in asking his question indicates that the answer intended is “no.” James's point is that a faith without works is not a saving faith.

<sup>124</sup>Matt 27:3 uses the semantic cognate μεταμέλομαι (cf. BAGD, p. 511). The construction in Heb 12:17 is variously interpreted. Some argue that Esau sorrowed over the loss of his birthright, but did not repent (e.g., Attridge, *Hebrews*, pp. 369–370). Others argue that he repented, but that his repentance was ineffective (e.g., Kent, *Hebrews*, pp. 267–268). In either case, there is agreement that Esau had changed his mind about his birthright and was filled with remorse that he had sold it.

<sup>125</sup>McKnight, “Perseverance of the Saints,” p. 150.

<sup>126</sup>ἀδύνατον γὰρ.

<sup>127</sup>For the former, see Bruce, *Hebrews*, p. 144. He states, “We know, of course, that nothing of this sort is ultimately impossible for the grace of God, but as a matter of human experience the reclamation of such people is, practically speaking, impossible.” For the latter view, see Moffatt, *Hebrews*, p. 179; Hughes, *Hebrews*, pp. 212–213; Attridge, *Hebrews*, pp. 167–169. Attempts by some to take the present participles in v. 6 as temporal, “it is impossible...while they crucify the Son of God,” suggesting that were they to stop doing this then it would be possible to restore them, have generally been re-

the proper understanding. The word “impossible” is used four times in Hebrews. In the other three instances, the force of the term is clearly absolute. In 6:18, the author of Hebrews writes, “in which it is impossible for God to lie.” In 10:4, he asserts that, “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” In 11:6, he states, “without faith it is impossible to please *God*.” The context in each of these instances rules out the possibility of exceptions. “Impossible” in all three cases means absolutely, without exceptions. Furthermore, the parallel expressions in the other warning passages add support to this interpretation. The force of the rhetorical question in the warning in 2:2–3, “how shall we escape,” is that there is no escaping the consequences of this sin.<sup>128</sup> The same may be said of the similar statement in 12:25, “how much less will we *escape*.”<sup>129</sup> Similarly, in 10:26, those guilty of this act face the harsh reality that “no sacrifice for sins remains.” No sacrifice means no forgiveness.<sup>130</sup> Moreover, the corollary to no forgiveness, according to 10:27, is the “fearful expectation of judgment.”<sup>131</sup> In other words, for those who commit this sin, there is no forgiveness; there is only the terrifying certainty of divine wrath.<sup>132</sup> The distinct impression is that the statement in 6:4 is absolute. It is impossible for God, or for anyone else, to restore those who have fallen away. Their sin is irremediable.

This conclusion raises a second question, why this sin is irremediable. Two explanations have been offered. The first is that it is irremediable because the sin of apostasy rejects the sole means of reconciliation. Salvation/reconciliation is an act of divine grace, conditioned by faith alone in the gospel alone. These, by rejecting the gospel, are rejecting the only means for their deliverance.<sup>133</sup> The second interpretation, not incompatible with the first, is that such sin, similar to the unpardonable sin in the Gospels, brings with it the invariable response of divine hard-

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jected. The oft quoted dictum by Bruce is frequently cited as an effective rebuttal, “To say that they cannot be brought to repentance so long as they persist in their renunciation of Christ would be a truism hardly worth putting into words” (*Hebrews*, p. 149).

<sup>128</sup> πῶς ἡμεῖς ἐκφευξόμεθα.

<sup>129</sup> εἰ γὰρ ἐκεῖνοι οὐκ ἐξέφυγον...πολὺ μᾶλλον ἡμεῖς.

<sup>130</sup> Hughes, *Hebrews*, p. 419.

<sup>131</sup> φοβερὰ δὲ τις ἐκδοχὴ κρίσεως. The term ἐκδοχὴ (“expectation”) carries with it the thought of certainty, that which is inevitable (Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, p. 534).

<sup>132</sup> Lane, *Hebrews*, pp. 291–293.

<sup>133</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 169; Lane, *Hebrews*, p. 142. Lane states, “The ἀδύνατον, which is used absolutely and without qualification in v 4, expresses an impossibility because the apostate repudiates the only basis upon which repentance can be extended.”

ening.<sup>134</sup> Either of these would provide a satisfactory answer to the above question. Both are consistent with the immediate and the larger contexts of the passage. To summarize, the author of Hebrews is saying that it is impossible to restore those who heard and understood the gospel but who reject it. This irreversible act has as its only prospect the judgment of God.

### Verses 7–8

For land that drinks the rain which often falls upon it and produces vegetation useful to those for whom it is cultivated receives blessing from God; but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned (Heb 6:7–8).

In vv. 7–8, the author of Hebrews uses an illustration from agriculture to reinforce and clarify his warning in vv. 4–6.<sup>135</sup> The illustration describes land that receives rain and produces a diverse yield, and the contrasting outcomes that result from this. The outcomes in each case illustrate the consequences of those who persevere in the faith and those who fall away.<sup>136</sup> As such, the illustration functions as an extension of the warning and must be taken into consideration in the interpretation.<sup>137</sup> The focus of the debate over this passage is with v. 8 and the interpretation of the consequences mentioned there.<sup>138</sup> The question raised is whether v. 8, in illustrating the consequences of falling away, refers to the chastisement of the saved or the punishment of the unsaved.<sup>139</sup> In other words, taking “land” in v. 8 as corresponding to the

<sup>134</sup>McKnight, “Warning Passages,” p. 33, concludes, “...‘impossible’ is to be understood as ‘God will not work in them any longer so it is impossible for them to be restored.’” On parallels outside of Hebrews, see Hughes, *Hebrews*, pp. 215–218.

<sup>135</sup>Postpositive γὰρ is taken either as causal or as explanatory. In either case, it would be supporting and clarifying the warning in vv. 4–6. See the discussion in Verbrugge, “Towards a New Interpretation,” pp. 62–63. On the background of the illustration, see Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 172, and on the structure, see Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, pp. 325–327.

<sup>136</sup>Virtually all agree that v. 7 illustrates the consequences of those who persevere and v. 8 the consequences of those who fall away (e.g., Bruce, *Hebrews*, pp. 149–150). Debate over whether it is the same parcel of land in vv. 7–8 or two different parcels is not a critical issue and may be pressing the illustration too far. For discussion, see Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints,” p. 155. The focus of the illustration, in any case, is on the contrasting yields and the contrasting consequences that result from those yields (Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:143).

<sup>137</sup>McKnight, “Warning Passages,” p. 35.

<sup>138</sup>ἐκφέρουσα δὲ ἀκάνθας καὶ τριβόλους, ἀδόκιμος καὶ κατάρως ἐγγύς, ἧς τὸ τέλος εἰς καῦσιν.

<sup>139</sup>Those who champion the second of the four views hold to the former; those who champion the first, third, and fourth views hold to the latter.

one falling away, are the expressions “worthless,” “near to being cursed,” and “which in the end will be burned” best understood as referring to the saved or the lost? The evidence favors the latter.

The expression worthless is used in the NT of that which has failed some test and is viewed as “disqualified,” “disapproved,” or “rejected.”<sup>140</sup> Based on 1 Corinthians 9:27 and the statement about Paul’s guarding himself while ministering to others lest he himself should be “disapproved,” some argue that the term can refer to the saved.<sup>141</sup> However, it is questionable whether it has this sense in 1 Corinthians 9:27 or elsewhere in the NT. The expression is employed of the unregenerate or reprobate, and, together with its antonym “approved,” contrasts the lost with the saved.<sup>142</sup> It is used in Romans 1:28, for example, to describe the unregenerate mind, that is, the mind of the lost. In 2 Corinthians 13:5, it is used of false believers, those “not in the faith.” In 2 Timothy 3:8, it is used of Jannes and Jambres, who opposed Moses and were disapproved, shown to be false “regarding the faith.” In all likelihood, that is its sense in 1 Corinthians 9:27. Paul is saying that he must exercise self-control lest he himself should fail the test and be rejected as one who is false and not true. Probability rests on the side that sees the same meaning for the expression here. Those who fall away do, by that act, fail the test of a genuine believer and are rejected by God.

The same may be said of the phrase “near to being cursed.” The adverb “near” does not suggest that this curse is close by but may be avoided. Identical to its use in 8:13 of the demise of the old covenant, it carries the idea of “imminent” and “inevitable.”<sup>143</sup> In 8:13, the author of Hebrews describes the old covenant as “aging” and “obsolete,” whose “disappearance” was “near.” The thought is that with the promise of a new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31–34 (Heb 8:8–12) there is the anticipation that the old covenant would be replaced and set aside. According to

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<sup>140</sup>BAGD, p. 18

<sup>141</sup>Oberholtzer, “Thorn-Infested Ground,” p. 325.

<sup>142</sup>*TDNT*, s.v. “δόκιμος,” by W. Grundmann, 2:255–260; *NIDNTT*, s.v. “δόκιμος,” by H. Haarbeck, 3:808–810. Haarbeck’s comments (p. 808) are noteworthy, “*dokimos* is used...in the sense of recognized, approved, accepted (Rom 14:18; 16:10; 1 Cor 11:19; 2 Cor 10:18); correspondingly *adokimos* means worthless, rejected, not in the sense of that which is seen from the first to be unsuitable (not even in Heb 6:8), but meaning that which has not stood the test, that which has been shown to be a sham, and has therefore been rejected (Rom 1:28; 1 Cor 9:27; 2 Cor 13:5; 2 Tim 3:8; Titus 1:16).”

<sup>143</sup>*TDNT*, s.v. “ἐγγύς,” by H. Preisker, 2:330–332; Moffatt, *Hebrews*, p. 82; Hughes, *Hebrews*, pp. 223–224; Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 173.

8:6, this new covenant has now been enacted with the death of Christ. Without question, what is near in 8:13 is what is imminent and certain. The context argues for the same sense for “near” in v. 8. In addition, the concept of a curse is difficult to understand, if it refers to the saved, but easily understood, if the reference is to the unsaved. The term is used elsewhere in the NT to describe God’s condemnation and wrath against the lost, and that is its likely sense in this passage.<sup>144</sup> Not only are those who fall away rejected by God, they also face the imminent and certain threat of divine judgment.

Finally, it has been argued that the burning in v. 8 is the same as that mentioned in 1 Corinthians 3:13, 15. In both passages, works are burned, and in both, the saved are judged.<sup>145</sup> This is consistent, it is further argued, with the common practice in the ancient Near East of burning a field to rid it of weeds, to clear it for productive growth.<sup>146</sup> The thought is that the judgment in v. 8 is for the restoring of the saved, not the punishing of the lost. While such an interpretation of the burning is possible, the concept of judgment and the reference to fire in the other warning passages weighs against seeing a judgment of the saved in v. 8. Elsewhere in the warning passages, as has been shown, the judgment is against the unbeliever, the one who is not saved. For example, the description of this judgment in 10:27 as a “raging fire that will consume the *enemies* of God” hardly sounds like God’s judging the saved. The same may be said of the reference in 12:29 to God as a “consuming fire.” The context of 12:29 is God’s future shaking or judging the created order prior to the establishing of His kingdom. The judgment here is the outpouring of divine wrath (12:26–28).<sup>147</sup> The evidence from all

<sup>144</sup> *TDNT*, s.v. “ἄρα,” by F. Buchsel, 1:448–451.

<sup>145</sup> Oberholtzer, “Thorn-Infested Ground,” pp. 325–326.

<sup>146</sup> Oberholtzer, “Thorn-Infested Ground,” p. 326. Oberholtzer differentiates between the present, temporal judgment of believers and the eschatological judgment of believers at the judgment seat of Christ. Heb 6:8 refers to the former whereas 1 Cor 3 refers to the latter, though the two are interrelated. His efforts to distinguish the thorns and thistles from the land as that which is burned in order to strengthen his interpretation of v. 8 is not supported by the syntax. The relative pronoun (ἧς) identifying that which is to be burned is feminine singular, agreeing with “land” (γῆ) in the preceding verse and not with the feminine plural “thorns” (ἀκάνθας) or the masculine plural “thistles” (τριβόλους) in v. 8. Cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 173; Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, p. 328.

<sup>147</sup> Heb 12:26 incorporates a citation from the LXX of Hag 2:6 where Haggai reminds the post-exilic community of God’s future, eschatological judgment of the nations (2:7) and of the entire created order (2:6). Heb 12:29 adapts the thought in Deut 4:24 where Moses is warning the nation to honor the covenant and shun idolatry (4:15–23). Both contexts address God’s retributive judgment against those who rebel against Him and reject His revelation. For discussion on the background and interpretation of Heb 12:25–29 in support of the above, see Attridge, *Hebrews*, pp. 378–383.

of this decisively favors taking the judgment in v. 8 as the judgment of God upon the lost. The “fire” represents the eschatological wrath of God that will be poured out against all who have rebelled against Him and have rejected His Word (cf. 12:25).

Taken together, the evidence from the illustration in vv. 7–8 further confirms the fourth view and its interpretation of vv. 4–6. The application of the illustration to vv. 4–6 is straightforward. Those who receive the good things of God enumerated in vv. 4–5 and demonstrate the genuineness of their faith by the fruit they bear obtain God’s blessing. On the other hand, those who experience these same good things but fail the test of genuineness by falling away from the faith are rejected by God and are under His curse.

### Verses 9

But, beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, things that belong to salvation, even though we are speaking in this way (Heb 6:9).

In vv. 9–12, the author of Hebrews transitions from words of warning to words of encouragement. He addresses the readers as “beloved” and expresses his confidence in their salvation. Two questions in particular are raised with these words of encouragement that are pertinent to the discussion of the warning passage. The first involves again the identification of those in view in the warning. Some argue that the author frequently uses the expression “we” when giving the warnings, indicating that he includes himself in them. Furthermore, he calls those who have been warned “beloved” and says that he is confident of their salvation. All of this suggests that the warnings are addressed to saved individuals.<sup>148</sup> The second question, related to the first, concerns the interpretation of the expression “better things, things that belong to salvation” and the force of the construction “even though we are speaking in this way.” Specifically, what is the antecedent of the expression “better things,” and how do this and the following statements assist in the interpretation of v. 4–6?

Without question, the warnings are addressed to the readers of the epistle, as seen by the frequent use of the second person plural in the warnings themselves.<sup>149</sup> In addition to the second person plural, the author of Hebrews also uses the first person plural in the same warnings.<sup>150</sup> However, this does not prove that everything said in the warn-

<sup>148</sup>E.g., McKnight, “Warning Passages,” p. 43.

<sup>149</sup>E.g., 3:12; 4:1; 5:11–12; 6:9–12; 10:35–36; 12:18, 22, 25.

<sup>150</sup>E.g., 2:1–4.

ings applies equally to the readers, nor that each statement is describing those who are saved. The author's use of *we* is not employed consistently throughout the warnings and may be the *we* of accommodation. In other words, he may mean "we believers" or "we who have made a profession of faith," without intending to include himself. This is suggested in the second warning passage in 4:1 where the author of Hebrews begins with the first person plural; when addressing the actual warning, however, he switches to the second person ("let *us* be careful lest *any of you*").<sup>151</sup> In any case, the use of the first person plural does not prove that every statement in the warning passages describes those who are saved. That must be determined by the nature of the statement and the form of address (*viz.*, first, second, third person) employed in each case.

In terms of the form of address, the evidence suggests that the author of Hebrews intentionally distances his readers from the statements in the warnings describing the action of an apostate. For example, in the third warning passage, the author of Hebrews begins by admonishing his readers in the second person ("*you* have become sluggish," 5:11; "*you* ought to be teachers,"<sup>152</sup> "*you* need someone to teach *you*," "*you* need milk," 5:12). Following this, he exhorts his readers to maturity, using the first person plural ("let *us* go on," 6:1; "this *we* will do," 6:3). However, when addressing the actual warning where he gives a description of the apostates, he uses third person constructions ("*those* who have," 6:4–6; "*they* crucify for themselves," 6:6).<sup>153</sup> Then, when returning to his exhortation in 6:9–12, he once again uses second person plurals ("better things concerning *you*," 6:9; "we desire that each of *you*," 6:11; "that *you* be not sluggish," 6:12). The distinct impression from what appears to be a conscious variation in the form of address is that the author of Hebrews intentionally distances his readers from the description of the apostates in vv. 4–6.<sup>154</sup>

The other statements in v. 9 further support this conclusion. The author of Hebrews describes the readers as "beloved," a common ex-

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<sup>151</sup>Cf. 12:25.

<sup>152</sup>The second person translation is based on taking the participial construction ὀφείλοντες εἶναι διδάσκαλοι as referring to the readers.

<sup>153</sup>The third person translation is based on the use of the third person pronoun ἐαυτοῖς with the plural participles.

<sup>154</sup>Grudem, "Perseverance of the Saints," p. 157. A similar variation is found in 10:26–39. The author of Hebrews begins the warning in v. 26 by making a conditional statement using the first person plural. But, when describing the actual actions of the apostate in vv. 28–29, he transitions to third person constructions. Then, when returning to exhortation in vv. 32–39, he switches back to second person and first person plural forms.

pression in the NT for addressing believers.<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, he expresses his confidence that “better things”<sup>156</sup> could be said of them and, specifically, the “things that belong to salvation.”<sup>157</sup> The basis for his confidence is the evidence of their salvation shown in the good works they had performed and were continuing to perform (v. 10).<sup>158</sup> The contrast between his confidence expressed here and the description of the apostates in the preceding verses is brought out in the statement “even though we are speaking in this way.”<sup>159</sup> This construction forms the protasis of a concessive clause that has as its apodosis the statement “[nevertheless] we are confident.”<sup>160</sup> The thrust of the concession is to contrast what the author of Hebrews has been saying previously with his present expression of confidence in the salvation of the readers. The verse could be paraphrased in this way, “In spite of the fact we were talking about things that belonged, not to salvation, but to divine condemnation and judgment, nevertheless, we are confident that you are saved.”

From this it can be seen that vv. 9–12 further validate the fourth view and its interpretation of vv. 4–6. Had the author of Hebrews in-

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<sup>155</sup>ἀγαπητοί. The term may denote one who is loved of God or simply be used as a term of endearment (BAGD, p. 6). Similar to the figurative use of ἀδελφός, it is found in direct address in the NT for those who share a spiritual bond. Cf. BAGD, pp. 15–16. Contrary to Oberholtzer, the expression “beloved” can be used of unbelievers (Rom 11:28) but that is not its force in v. 9 (“Thorn-Infested Ground,” p. 327).

<sup>156</sup>τὰ κρείσσονα. There is debate both on the use of the article and the force of the comparative. A number of commentaries take the article as anaphoric and understand the comparative as making a positive statement, the entire construction referring to the “good” things in v. 7 in contrast to the “bad” things in v. 8. Cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 174; Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:144; Ellingsworth, *Hebrews*, p. 329. Grudem, on the other hand, takes the article as making the adjective substantival and argues that the construction “better” is used comparatively elsewhere in Hebrews (1:4; 7:7, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24) and should be understood here as well (“Perseverance of the Saints,” p. 158). The comparison in this case is between the good things mentioned in vv. 4–5, which are the evidence of divine blessing, and the better things in vv. 10–12, which are evidences of salvation. Either interpretation would support the position argued here. The use of the adjective elsewhere in Hebrews appears to support Grudem’s contention.

<sup>157</sup>καὶ ἐχόμενα σωτηρίας. The construction represents a common Greek idiom for what is connected with or pertaining to something, here of salvation (Moffatt, *Hebrews*, p. 83; Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 174).

<sup>158</sup>The γὰρ in v. 10 indicates that vv. 10ff. identify the basis for author’s confidence in his readers’ salvation expressed in v. 9 (Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 174; Lane, *Hebrews*, p. 144).

<sup>159</sup>εἰ καὶ οὕτως λαλοῦμεν.

<sup>160</sup>RSV, NASB, NIV. Note the use of εἰ καὶ. On the form and function of concessive clauses, see Ernest De Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek*, 3rd ed. (reprint of 1898 ed., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973), pp. 112–116.

tended vv. 4–6 to describe those who were saved, it is difficult to understand why he would say in v. 9 that he was persuaded of better things of the readers, and particularly, of the things that belong to salvation.<sup>161</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The chief strength with the fourth view is its interpretation of v. 6. Specifically, it defines the sin in the warning passages as the sin of apostasy, a conscious and deliberate rejection of the gospel. Furthermore, this sin as an irremediable act whose ultimate consequence is eternal condemnation and judgment. The preceding discussion has substantiated this interpretation. This rules out the second view which argues that the judgment in these verses is that of the saved. The judgment in the warning passages is not that of the saved. It is the final and eternal judgment of God against the unsaved. In addition, it has been demonstrated from v. 6 that this sin is neither hypothetical nor impossible. In fact, it was argued from 10:25–26 that some who had been associated with the readers had actually committed this sin. This negates the third view which argues that this sin was both hypothetical and impossible. Lastly, it was argued that Scripture teaches the eternal security of those who are saved. Salvation, once received, can never be lost. This rules out the first view which argues that the warning involved the loss of salvation. Neither this nor the other warning passages, in describing the action of an apostate, are describing one who is saved. That leaves the fourth view as the only alternative.

The author of Hebrews had confidence in the salvation of his readers, as was seen in vv. 9ff. Yet, in 10:26, he indicates that some had forsaken the services of the local congregation and had repudiated the faith they had at one time professed. Moreover, in 5:11–14, the author of Hebrews chastises the readers for growing inattentive to God's Word and to their responsibilities for spiritual growth. This combination compels him to exhort his readers to perseverance and to warn any who might fall away of the dire consequences of such an act. They were to persevere in the faith because, according to 3:14, only those who persevere show themselves to be partakers of Christ and truly saved. This does not mean that perseverance in the faith is a condition for salvation. Rather, perseverance in the faith is understood as the mark of those who are saved. Were any to fall away, they would show they had not been partakers of Christ, that is, that they never had been saved. Furthermore, by falling away they would be committing an irremediable act which would inevitably bring God's condemnation and wrath.

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<sup>161</sup>Cf. Grudem, "Perseverance of the Saints," p. 159.