

Bible Difficulties

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Hebrews 6:4-6

⁴For it is impossible *for someone* once enlightened_{ph}, and having tasted of the heavenly gift, and having become a partaker of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and having tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, ⁶to then fall by the wayside, to renew again into repentance, crucifying himself the Son of God, and exposing him to public disgrace.

This passage is often employed to disprove the perseverance of the saints; in other words, to prove that we can lose our salvation. You may have heard the phrase, "Once saved, always saved." Although this is true, it is not a license to lead a wanton life, which is thought to be the outcome of promoting the doctrine of perseverance. What makes us anxious about this passage from Hebrews is that we aren't sure what it means to "fall by the wayside" or "fall away." It implies that we can never be confident or secure in our salvation. The word for "fall away" literally means to fall down beside someone; it is used to describe someone who stops following or worshipping God. If we do fall away in this sense, it appears to say that there is no coming back. If I stop attending church for a month, does this verse apply to me? What about six months? What if I attend, but I only go through the motions? Have I fallen away? And what if I have? Do I have only one shot at eternal life, and if I blow it, am I done for? Must I be continually perfect, or else wind up in hell?

To determine what it really means, we first need to establish the content of the underlying text. Then we can determine how to render it correctly. Heb. 6:4-6 literally reads as follows (Strong's numbers are in parentheses):

For (1063) impossible (102) once (530) having been enlightened (5461, 5685), and also (5037) having tasted (1089, 5666) of the heavenly (2032) gift (1431), and (2532) becoming (1096, 5679) sharers (3353) of the Holy (40) Spirit (4151), and (2532) having tasted (1089, 5666) the excellent (2570) word (4487) of God (2316), and also (5037) the power (1411) of the age (165) about to be (3195, 5723), then (2532) to fall away (3895, 5631), to renew (340) again (3825), into (1519) repentance (3341) to be crucifying (388, 5723) himself (1438) the Son (5207) of God (2316), and (2532) to expose to public disgrace (3856, 5723).

Well, that doesn't make much sense. But we know from the context that these verses are said in reply to, or to explain, verses 1-3. That's why the phrase begins "For," or "because." It is a conclusion to a proposition. But as it is traditionally rendered, verses 1-3 don't look like a proposition at all. In fact, they don't seem to be very relevant to the conclusion in verses 4-6. And so they make that word "for" stick out like a sore thumb.

This is going to take two steps to resolve. We need to examine verses 1-3 before we can figure out what verses 4-6 are intended to say. Here are the traditional ASV verses 1-3:

"Wherefore, leaving the doctrine of the first principles of Christ, let us press on to perfection; not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, ²of the teaching of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. ³And this we will do, if God permit."

“Wherefore.” Sounds like another conclusion, doesn’t it? What has the writer been discussing prior to this sentence? The previous chapters discussed the fundamentals of salvation. They talked about who Jesus Christ is and what he accomplished on the cross, the fact that we have entered into rest because he is our great priest and mediator. And it talks a lot about obedience, the meat of the mature Christian. The writer rebukes his audience for their laziness or willfulness in failing to move toward maturity. The word “therefore” indicates that we are about to move past this basic knowledge, and lay hold of the things which demonstrate our maturity. And a list of things is given in verses 1 and 2. But nothing in this list has been discussed yet. How curious. If he wants to get past things, we would expect him to list those things here. But he doesn’t. This inconsistency, or contradiction, drives us to examine closely what is actually being said, because something is amiss here, and it is causing confusion and doubt as to what is meant.

Let’s compare this passage in the *Syriac Bible* c. 5th century (or *Peshitta* – George Lamsa’s 1933 translation):

“Therefore, let us leave the elementary word of Christ, and let us go on to perfection. Why do you lay again another foundation for the repentance from past deeds and for faith in God? And for the doctrine of baptisms, and for the laying on of hands, and for the resurrection of the dead, and for eternal judgment? If the Lord permits, this we will do.”

How do we reconcile these two different renderings of the same text? The first talks about the writer moving past these things that he suggests he has already taught. But these are the very things that the second passage says the audience should not be involved with at all. Notice the Syriac says it is “*another*” foundation instead of the same foundation referred to in the first text. So let’s see what we can do to split the single idea in the first rendering into the two ideas we find in the *Syriac*, because the Syriac has no such inconsistency. We can do this by interpretation. We could say that “not laying...” refers indirectly to the Hebrews, rather than directly to the speaker. And why would it refer to them instead of him? It seems that the Hebrews have been doing something unnecessary by *laying other foundations*. That is perfectly clear in the *Peshitta*. Applying this interpretation to the words in our traditional text, we can reconcile the two. There is a now change of thought. The writer of Hebrews is warning his audience that they haven’t learned the basics, so stop going off on these specified tangents.

What about the difference between *again* and *another*? The word “again” in the traditional text was based on the speaker being the reference. He is repeating himself, again. But if the reference is to the audience, as I’m suggesting, then the word in Greek can also mean “further.” They have been laying a *further* foundation. They have either been going beyond what is written and falling into conjecture, or else they have been repeating the same old stuff over and over, without moving on to the application of its truth in their lives. And so, giving you a preview of what is about to come, here are verses 1-8 in the ESB:

Therefore leaving the doctrine of the first principles of Christ, let us press on to perfection, not laying a further foundation of repentance from dead works, faith toward God, ²the teaching of baptisms, laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³And *press on* we will, however much God allows. ⁴For it is impossible for someone once enlightened, and having tasted of the heavenly gift, and having become a partaker of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and having tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, ⁶to then fall by the wayside, to renew again to repentance, crucifying himself the Son of God, and exposing him to public disgrace. ⁷For the land which has drunk the rain that often comes upon it

receives blessing from God, and *it* produces herbs fit for those by whom it is tilled: ⁸but if it produces thorns and thistles, *it is* rejected, nearly trash; its end is to be burned.

The sense here is that we must press on, not stopping in our progress toward maturity. It is characteristic of any true Christian. We will not be distracted by side-issues, nor become stuck in a rut, allowing the old man to regain dominion over us. If we do, then it is *as if* we were never saved. It denies the reality of Christ's sacrifice for us, and his intent to present us holy and without blemish to God (Col. 1:22). Being less than that shames Christ in the eyes of the world (Rom. 2:24). *Press on*. We must make our calling and election sure (2Pet. 1:10). Faith without works is dead (Jms. 2:26). We were bought at a price (1Cor. 6:20). We believers are reminded of the curse that hangs over unbelievers. We must consider our ways (Hag. 1:5-8). *Are* we truly saved? Then we must act like it! We must act out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12), knowing that the curse is very real for those who are not in Christ. Our only indicator of our own salvation is this: we will be known by our fruits (Mat. 7:16). In fact, this verse is directly alluded to in 6:8 here. It mentions the same "thorns and thistles" which produce no fruit. And so, there is nothing new or different being said here. James hammered this home all through his epistle. There is no second forgiveness. Either we are in Christ, permanently saved, for God's gifts and his calling are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29), or we have never been saved, and salvation is still ours for the asking.

Is this interpretation, pointing to the audience instead of the speaker, dishonest, or perhaps inaccurate? Not at all. Have we altered the meaning? Yes. Obviously. However, we are not altering or misrepresenting the meaning of the *underlying* text in the least, only of the rendered text. In fact, I believe it brings it closer to the intended meaning. And now we see why the Peshitta is worded the way it is; there is an issue being raised that requires an explanation. With the issue finally and clearly on the table, we can understand why verses 4-6 begin with the word "For."

All we have left to do is to determine what 4-6 says. But we run into the same issue we had with verses 1-3. The same words can be rendered in two very different ways. John Gill interprets verses 4-6 from the *Syriac* this way:

"For it is impossible that there should be any who have been once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and yet fall away; that they should sin again so as to die spiritually and stand in need of a new work of grace, which would require crucifying Christ again, and re-exposing him to public shame (*which is impossible*)."

In other words, there is no need for the Hebrews to "lay another foundation," perhaps attempting to explain those who fall away (which is related to the question of repentance and faith mentioned in the list). That is because true believers cannot fall away: it is *impossible*. It is not saying that if they did fall away, there would be no way to re-crucify Christ to get them re-forgiven. It is saying that, because it is *impossible* to fall away, it is *unnecessary* to re-crucify Christ. God's promises are irrevocable. His sovereignty cannot be thwarted. Therefore, the Hebrews should stop trying to explain how such a thing could happen, because it can't. If people don't *act* saved, it may be because they are *not* saved.

Sometimes the argument over this passage centers on whether it speaks of believers or non-believers. If it speaks of believers who fall away, then it would be saying that somehow the Holy Spirit is not really the deposit, the earnest (a contractual term), who ensures the fulfillment of the promise toward us (Rom. 4:16; 2Cor. 1:22, 5:5; Eph. 1:13-14). That promise is guaranteed by Christ (Heb. 6:17-20; 7:22), as intended by the Father (Gen. 3:15; Isa. 53; Heb. 6:17). And if it speaks of non-believers, then they certainly cannot fall away from *faith*, because they have no faith. If they did, they would be believers. They never appropriated faith, and so they have no need to get it again, or “renew” it. Additionally, the things enumerated, especially being sharers or “partakers of the Holy Spirit,” all point to gifts and blessings that are enjoyed only by believers. And so it seems clear to me that believers are the object here. The only issue is whether it is possible for believers to fall away. It is not. It would contradict too many crucial passages of Scripture. It would deny the whole intent of Christ going to the cross on behalf of those his father gave him. “I guarded them, and not one of them perished.” (John 17:12).

What has been frustrating for interpreters, is that the traditional translation has made it so difficult to defend or explain. The problem is not the interpretation, but the translation itself. It is fascinating that the underlying text is identical for these two contradictory, but equally plausible, renderings. And it doesn’t matter whether we use the TR, the Syriac, or the Vulgate. It all depends on how we convert it into English. This is an excellent example of why there are no “pure” translations, not even allegedly literal ones. They all involve interpretation. And as I argued in the Preface, all good translations ought to begin with doctrine. It is infused into the text, not derived from it. Otherwise it produces the very confusion we see here.

Michael Horton offers another exegesis based on the traditional translations.¹ He reminds us that the circle of the covenant is larger than the circle of the elect. There are those who enjoy the blessings of the covenant, but who are not in the circle of the elect. For example, Abraham’s son Ishmael was circumcised just like Isaac. And so he was within the circle of the covenant. For awhile he enjoyed the blessings of being an offspring of Abraham. This was true of Esau as well, as compared to Jacob. But only the line of Isaac and Jacob would inherit the kingdom. Jesus suggests this in the parable of the wheat and the tares, speaking of the field as the *church*, not the world.

Horton writes, “This is Paul’s central argument in Romans 9, against the charge that God has failed to keep his promise to Abraham. If we interpret the warnings of being broken off in Romans 9-11 as supporting the notion that those who are genuinely regenerated and justified can lose their salvation, we will miss Paul’s point. After all, it is branches that fail to produce fruit that are broken off – that is, members of the covenant who nevertheless fall short of truly embracing the word that is preached. They have a title deed to God’s salvation, but they, like Esau, sell it for immediate gratification in this world... It is not that they are regenerated and justified, experiencing sanctification, but then fall away and lose their salvation.”

For further study, see John Gill, *In the Cause of God and Truth*, Part I, section 50.

¹ *Four Views on Eternal Security*, J. Matthew Pinson, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2002), pp. 36-37.

Hebrews 10:26-29

²⁶For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remains no more sacrifice for sins, ²⁷but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and a fiery fierceness which will devour the adversaries. ²⁸One who despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: ²⁹how much sorer punishment do you suppose someone will be judged worthy of, who has trodden underfoot the Son of God, and has counted the blood of the covenant, with which he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and treated the Spirit of grace with contempt?

This passage is used by advocates of universal atonement to prove that Christ died for some who perish (i.e. to disprove limited atonement), and to prove that believers can fall away (i.e. to disprove perseverance).

What it sounds like is that if a believer willfully sins, then there is no sacrifice remaining for that sin. I cannot think how I would sin if not willfully. It seems to say that the benefit of Christ's sacrifice was completely exhausted at the moment of our salvation, and cannot cover any sins committed afterward. And worse still, any of those subsequent sins result in a stiffer punishment than if we had never become a Christian in the first place. So where is the good news in that? We wind up in the same boat we were in before Christ came. The promise of redemption and reconciliation would be ineffectual, because it could offer no benefit to any recipient who willfully sinned. That would make it an empty promise unless we became Christ-like on the day of our conversion. We know it makes no sense, and it seemingly contradicts what we know to be true. But how do we explain it?

The first question is whether it was rendered correctly. If it was, and I believe it was, then we are stuck with the knotty problem of interpreting it in a way that is honest, but which supports and reinforces the doctrine that is generously evidenced throughout the rest of Scripture. The rule of interpretation is this: if there are numerous passages speaking directly and specifically to an issue, and there are a few or only one appearing to contradict the majority, the majority rules. The task is to discover the basis of the exceptions. And this appears to be an exception.

Here is the original, literal wording with Strong's numbers:

- 26 For <1063> we <2257> sinning <264> (5723) willfully <1596> after <3326> receiving <2983> (5629) full knowledge <1922> of the truth <225>, there is remaining <620> (5743) no longer <3765> a sacrifice <2378> for <4012> sins <266>,
27 But <1161> a certain <5100> fearful <5398> expectation <1561> of judgment <2920> and <2532> fiery <4442> zeal <2205>, intending <3195> (5723) to devour <2068> (5721) opponents <5227>.
28 Someone <5100> who despised <114> (5660) Moses' <3475> law <3551> died <599> (5719) without <5565> mercy <3628> on <1909> two <1417> or <2228> three <5140> witnesses <3144>:
29 Of how much <4214> worse <5501> punishment <5098>, suppose <1380> (5719), worthy of <515> (5701), who <3588> tramples <2662> (5660) the Son <5207> of God <2316>, and <2532> considers <2233> (5666) blood <129> of covenant <1242>, by which <3739> <1722> he was sanctified <37> (5681), profane <2839>, and <2532> insults <1796> (5660) the Spirit <4151> of grace <5485>?

The only word I want to look at is *sinning*. We know it is willful. As I said, I don't think we accidentally sin unless there is a rule we don't realize applies to our situation; or we encounter a moral dilemma in which several rules apply and we apply the wrong rule. That happens, but it is not the norm. The norm is that I choose to sin. I want it. I know it is wrong. But I'm going to do

it... just this once, of course. And then I begin with my justifications and excuses. But the word *sinning* here indicates an ongoing, continual *habit* of sin, a fixed deviation from the path, one that perhaps characterizes my way of life. That's what the number 5723 tells me. It is present active tense. It is not "sinned" in the past, or "will sin" in the future; it is my present mode of behavior.

And I am *willful* about it. It is not a matter of weakness, like craving that second piece of cheesecake. It is not a matter of failing to consider it, like immediately and angrily reacting to some baseless accusation made against me. It is intentionally choosing to rebel, knowing what I am doing, and which commands I am violating, as a kind of in-your-face declaration. And it is my habit to do so. I am setting myself up as God's judge-in-residence, weighing and counter-manding his will for me, daily.

The implication of such wanton behavior is that it casts my salvation into doubt, much as we saw with Heb. 6:4-6. But let's say that it speaks to true believers, rather than some hypothetical unbeliever who wandered into the wedding feast without a gown (Matt. 22:11-12). Warnings wouldn't do him much good anyway. He lacks the capacity to comply. For the believer, is this passage anything other than a dire warning to consider our ways? I don't think so. And in that capacity, it is not unique.

The troubling phrase here is this: "no more sacrifice for sin remains." I don't know why that should trouble anyone. It is a wonderful promise from God. There was only one sacrifice made, and it was made only once. There is no ongoing sacrifice, nor will there be another (Heb. 7:27; 9:12; 10:10). It is not saying that if we sin, we are lost, and there is nothing remaining to be done for us. Far from it. It is saying that all our sins are completely forgiven, sprinkled with the blood of Christ for cleansing. It is an accomplished thing. We are the adopted children of the Holy One, the Lord God Almighty, inheritors of the kingdom, dearly beloved. Now *act* like it! For if we do not act like it, then this is what we are actually doing in the spiritual realm: we are spitting on the blood of Christ, and the Comforter who lives in us (Eph. 4:30); we are abusing the gift of the Father, and acting like a rebellious child in need of correction (Job 5:17; Prov. 3:12). Stop behaving as if there was some other recourse! There is none.

There is no going back like a dog to its vomit (2Pet. 2:22). We are commanded to consider who we are, and what we have become. If we don't understand what has been done for us, and who has done it, and what debt of gratitude we owe to him, then of course we are going to despise it, and treat it with indifference or contempt. This passage is a wake-up call to believers. It has lots of company throughout the Scripture where we are cautioned to identify ourselves, to set ourselves apart, just as the Levites did when Moses called them to God's side (Ex. 32:28): "And if the righteous is barely saved, where will the ungodly and sinner appear?" (1Pe 4:18) "Now I desire to remind you, although you know all things once for all, that the Lord, having saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe." (Jude 1:5) In fact, the entire Book of Jude is intended to sound out this warning, just as a watchman on the wall is obligated to do (Ezek. 3:17-21). "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked: for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap." (Ga 6:7)

I am guessing that today's "easy believe-ism" has lulled the Christian community into indifference about their "conversation," or way of life. And when we hear of hell-fire and damnation, or the duty to obey, it is shocking, and even offensive to the modern ear. It is denounced as judgmental, or legalistic. There are two types of obedience to consider as a Christian. The first is perfect obedience that brings salvation. Only Christ had that type of obedience. It is imputed to believers, that is, it is treated or considered as if it was their own. The second type is what John Owen used to refer to as "habitual righteousness." It means, our behavioral habit, the way we walk and live. It does not lead to salvation. We already have that. It does not merit what we have received from Christ. It is not as if we were repaying a loan, or earning the gift we received. But it is definitely an expression of faith, a statement of thanksgiving, and how well we obey is definitely a reflection on the kingdom. James warns the Church that obedience has not been dispensed with. It remains as the only indicator of faith.

Jesus said in John 15:4-11,

- 4 **"Abide in me,** and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine; so neither can you, unless you abide in me.
- 5 I am the vine, you are the branches: One who abides in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit: for apart from me you can do nothing.
- 6 **If a certain man does not abide in me, he is thrown out** like a branch, withered; and these are gathered, and thrown into the fire, and burned.
- 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask what you intend, and it will appear to you.
- 8 In this, my Father is glorified, so that you might bear much fruit, and will appear my disciples.
- 9 Even as the Father has loved me, I have also loved you: abide in my love.
- 10 **If you keep my commandments, you will abide** in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love.
- 11 These things have I spoken to you, so that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be made full.

Jesus is speaking to his disciples, not unbelievers. How is this any different than what we read in Hebrews? It isn't. Don't let verse 6 throw you. This isn't talking about being thrown out of the kingdom to wither, as some translations suggest. And it isn't talking about falling out of the kingdom on our own because we failed to produce fruit. It says, "a certain man," not "one of you." Verse 2 reads, "every *branch* that bears fruit, he prunes it, that it may bear more fruit." If I were that pruned branch, did part of me get thrown out of the kingdom and part of me remain? That would be silly. We know that those who are not found "in Christ" will be thrown into the fire. They are already withered because they have no source of life apart from Christ. We do. And our purpose is to produce fruit to glorify God. Our means is to "abide in Christ." This entire passage says the things in our life that are unfruitful will be pruned off so that the vine might be fruitful. Every gardener knows that you cannot point to one part of a vine, and say that somehow it is not the vine itself. We are a unity in Christ. It is a Trinitarian-style relationship, a corporate relationship, not an independent one as Arminians would have it. The issue this passage addresses is our need to be obedient. How can we abide in Christ in unity, and yet find no statistical distinction between the behavior of the Church, and the behavior of the world? That is reprehensible and discouraging. Read Heb. 10:26-29 in that light.

For further study, see John Gill, *In the Cause of God and Truth*, Part I, section 51.