

“Five Approaches” Hebrews 5:11-6:12

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Hebrews 6:4-6 is the most difficult passage to interpret in the book of Hebrews... and perhaps in the whole Bible. Take a moment to read it. There are five major interpretations of this passage.

1 – The Loss of Salvation View

This view identifies the people mentioned as genuine believers, and who forfeit their eternal salvation due to apostasy. This is the favorite view from the Arminian camp. One weakness of this view are the many biblical passages speaking to the security of the believer's salvation. Then also the passage states that it is *impossible* to come back.

2 – The Hypothetical View

This view understands the “falling away” through apostasy to be purely hypothetical. It never really can happen with believers. The greatest weakness of this view is that it adds an “if” to the biblical text before the warning about falling away.

3 – The Test of Genuineness View

This view identifies the people in question as false believers who will fall away. It is perhaps the most common in the Calvinist camp. The greatest weakness of this view is forcing the five descriptions of these individuals to refer to false Christians.

4 – The Means of Salvation View

This view holds that salvation is only available to those who believe *to the end*. The means of this salvation is the coupling of God's promises and the threat of apostasy to steer people into believing.

There is a 5th view that I will mention later. But right now, let's get into the text.

MATURITY (5:11-14)

The author has built a strong case by this point in the book that salvation can never be gained by strict obedience to the Mosaic Law. It can only be enjoyed through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He wrote to a group of Christians who were strongly Jewish in background and spoke to them of spiritual maturity... the realization that a works-based approach to salvation is ineffective. A faith-based approach to salvation is, and always has been, the only true path. This is what 5:11-14 is all about. *And remember that he was writing to the upper crust of Hebrew society... to those who knew the Mosaic Law well.* Read those verses now. The estimation of their spiritual maturity was not based on what they knew, but on the true application to their own lives of salvation by faith in Jesus... the Messiah.

US (6:1-3)

Hebrews 6:1 The elementary doctrine of Messiah was what they already knew. Notice that the word “maturity” appears again (see the last verse of the previous chapter). This is the link with the last verse of chapter five. Notice the phrase “**repentance from dead works.**” This defines what the author means by “repentance” in his letter. Salvation in Christ is by faith, not works. In that sense works are dead. This word “repentance” will show up in verse six. It would also be most natural to understand it there as “**repentance from dead works.**”

Hebrews 6:2 The word “washings” in verse two is literally “baptisms.” This is not a reference to Christian baptism. It is likely a reference to the various Jewish purity rituals. The author lists the things in 6:1b-2 as some of the instruction they already knew... instruction they had to move on from.

Hebrews 6:3 Notice that word “permits.” I will refer to it later. If God permits, they will go on to maturity.

THEM (6:4-8)

Hebrews 6:4-5 Verses 4-6 are all one sentence in the original text. First, “impossible” means just that... impossible! Two other occurrences of this word in the book of Hebrews are in 6:18 and 11:6. And this word was placed in the strongest position of emphasis in the text... as the very first word. Then the author gives five descriptions of these people, with the first two and the last two being linked by grammar. A critical question must now be asked. Who do these five descriptions refer to... false believers or genuine believers? How you understand this passage pivots on this question. And be careful not to let your theology get in the way of your exegesis. Arminians will quickly say “genuine Christians” because they can lose their salvation. Calvinists would generally say “false Christians” because true Christians can’t lose their salvation. But for both camps their theology has gotten in the way of their exegesis. As best as you can, put your theology aside for a moment and take a hard look at these five descriptions. You will find that they very easily refer to true Christians. Understanding these descriptions to refer to those who are only pseudo-Christians is forced.

Hebrews 6:6 “Fallen away” is often taken to be the renouncing of one’s salvation in Christ. This is referred to as apostasy. Here is a reference where that term is used in the New American Standard Bible (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3). The word in Greek is a-po-sta-si'-a. We get our word “apostasy” from it. But the Greek word for “fallen away” in Hebrews 6:6 is pa-ra-pip'-to. A full examination of that word in the New Testament, in the Septuagint, and in extra-biblical literature shows no other place where it means apostasy. Instead, it indicates in Hebrews falling into sin and opposition to God. Let me remind you of the events at Kadesh (Numbers 13:26) where the 12 spies reported back to Israel. The author of Hebrews had strongly referred to this just a little earlier (Hebrews 3:7-4:13). The people rebelled and tested God for the 10th time (Numbers 14:22). As a result, those who were 20 years old and above (excluding Joshua and Caleb) would die before Israel entered the Promised Land (Numbers 14:28-30). God would not *permit* them to enter even though He had pardoned them (Numbers 14:20). The Israelites in Numbers had fallen away from God and had sinned against Him, but they had not lost their salvation. Carry this thought into Hebrews 6:6. Picking up from the first Greek word in this sentence, it is *impossible* to restore those to repentance who have fallen away. It was impossible to restore them to repenting from dead works. But why does it say that? They were actively taking a step that amounted to a fresh public rejection of the person and work of Christ. They were reaffirming the view of Christ’s enemies that He deserved to die on a cross. They were expressing solidarity with those Jews who put Christ on the cross. But why was it impossible to restore them? Something was getting in the way of that restoration. The five descriptions of these individuals and the statement that they had fallen away are all in the past tense, but there are two present tense words, things that they were continuing to do. They were in a sense crucifying Jesus again, and by so doing were holding Him up to contempt. Clearly, this was getting in the way of their being restored. But there was a possibility of something else. Just as God did not permit the sinning Israelites to enter the Promised Land, He may not permit these individuals to move on to spiritual maturity.

5 – The Loss of Rewards View

Now is the time for the 5th view. Hebrews 6:4-6 refers to genuine Christians who had fallen away from a faith-based salvation in Christ, and who again expressed solidarity with the works-based salvation approach of their Jewish culture. Though they did not lose their salvation they certainly did lose many of the rewards and benefits that come through Christ. If you read the Bible Knowledge Commentary out of Dallas Theological Seminary you will find that they follow this view, as does the ESV and other translations. The rest of today’s verses flow very quickly with this understanding of 6:4-6.

Hebrews 6:7-8 *Let this illustration just be the illustration. Don’t push “burned” to be a metaphor of hell.*

YOU (6:9-12)

Hebrews 6:9-12 Take a moment to read these verses.

Paul would state this theology in two wonderful verses.

ESV Ephesians 2:8-9 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.