

Better Things Concerning You
Hebrews 6:4–12
January 7, 2024

Thursday morning, while driving east down Stout headed here—a path I’ve driven five to ten thousand times—I saw something I’d never seen before. As one travels down that road and approaches Germantown Road, there’s a hill. That hill *isn’t* what I’d never seen before. I’ve seen it every time.

But to set the scene, to the left of that hill is a series of houses. And to the right is a line of trees. Parenthesis: if you look through those trees a little before 8 am, many mornings you’ll see deer in a field. I’ve seen the hill every time I’ve driven down Stout. I’ve seen deer in that field many, many times. But what I’d never seen before was a large mirror hanging up *in* one of those trees, directly across the street from those houses.

Why is a huge mirror hanging in a tree? Because that hill is a blind hill. As you approach it, you cannot see oncoming traffic. And those driveways pull out right at the base of the hill. I didn’t pull into any of those driveways to verify, but you don’t have to be a genius to figure out that they hung the mirror up in those trees—at a particular angle—so that they could see the cars at the top of the hill before they pulled out.

The mirror *warns* them. As we’ve said, if we’re going to read Hebrews rightly, we have to disabuse ourselves of the notion that the word “warning” only carries negative connotations. It’s not always in ALL CAPS, yelling at you. Warnings can be loving. Whether a mirror in a tree, or a word from a friend, or counsel from a physician, often they’re for our good.

Because warnings are not only loving, and for our good, they can also deliver. The 16-year-old looks into the trees and waits until the truck passes before backing out. A heeded warning can prevent certain consequences.

This morning we’ve arrived at quite possibly the most debated passage in the book of Hebrews. To be frank, it’s also one of the more difficult texts for those of us that hold to the doctrines of grace. There’s a certain amount of tension in the words themselves. Hebrews 6 *appears* to be assaulting our theological conclusions.

I use the word “appear” on purpose. Because, as we think through it together, a couple broader considerations will lessen the tension by putting these words in their proper context. First, clarifying what aspect of salvation Hebrews emphasizes will alleviate some of the tension. Secondly, being clear on the function of warnings in the overall argument of Hebrews will alleviate even more.¹

To speak to that—the *function* of the warnings—hear how Spurgeon understood the aim of this oft-debated passage: “If God has put it in, He has put it in for wise reasons and for excellent purposes. Let me show you why. First, O Christian, it is put in to keep thee from falling away. God preserves his children from falling away; but *he keeps them by the use of means*. . . There is a deep precipice: what is the best way to keep any one from going down there? Why, to tell him that if he did he would inevitably be dashed to pieces. . . Our friend puts away from us a cup of arsenic; he does not want us to drink it, but he says, “If you drink it, it will kill you.” Does he suppose for a moment that we should drink it. No; he tells us the consequences, and he is sure we will not do it.”² How do the warnings in the book of Hebrews function? In *that* way, as *means*.

¹ Did I say *all* the tension would evaporate by 11:30 AM today? I did not.

² Charles Spurgeon’s sermon, “Final Perseverance,” quoted in Tom Schreiner, *The Race Set Before Us*, 203, emphasis mine.

God is a God of both *means* and *ends*. His purposes are sure. They cannot be altered. But we still pray. His people are purchased. But we, Romans 10, still speak. Salvation is certain. But He still warns.

So, among the scenarios envisioned for this passage, is it possible that *some* hearing these words were living *among* the people of God but hadn't *truly* believed? Yes. Did *they* need to be warned of the consequences? Absolutely. But, also, does God use warnings in the life of a believer to spur *him* or *her* on to perseverance? He can; and He does.

God is a God of both *means* and *ends*. And just so you don't think this passage shifts what we believe about God's keeping—His preservation—these warnings *always* accomplish their aim—they're *always* effective—in the lives of those God purchased.³ We'll see that clearly in verses 9–12.

It's both/and. God keeps; and one of the ways God keeps—one of the *means* by which He does so—is by warning His people. Back in October, when Chris preached the last warning passage from Hebrews 3, he said something along these lines, "If you're only flying the flag of the preservation of the saints, don't take it down, but run another flag up the pole that says perseverance."⁴

1. A Warning About Perseverance (vv. 4–6)

Hebrews 6 picks up the pattern we've seen throughout Hebrews. There's *exposition*, where the author details how Christ is better. Then, that exposition is followed by *exhortation*—encouraging those hearing that exposition to *live as if* it is actually true.⁵ Hebrews 1 was mainly *exposition*, followed by the first *exhortation* at the beginning of chapter 2, which was then followed by exposition in the *last* half of that chapter, followed by *exhortation* in chapter 3, followed by *exposition* in chapters 4 and 5, and we're back to *exhortation* in chapter 6.

I say all that, in part, so that we see the overall pattern, but also to say that this exhortation is *not* to be disconnected from the ones prior. Bible interpretation 101: keep passages in context, especially hard ones. Bible interpretation 101A: with hard passages, interpret the unclear with the clear.

And the argument of Hebrews—and of each of the warning passages—has been unmistakably plain. Christ is better. Don't turn back. And that's *still* what the author has to say. Verse 4: **For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come.**

Right off the bat, we've waltzed into a minefield. What does the author mean, **once been enlightened**? What does **tasted** mean? What's the **heavenly gift**? I've sort of always been fascinated by this passage in Hebrews 6. In fact, for a New Testament class in seminary—2009ish—an assignment given me was to write an exegetical paper on *any* passage in the New Testament. I chose this one. I still have that paper. I read it this week. It's less than impressive.

One of the things I did in that paper was take each individual word and do an in-depth word study on it. Can I tell you something we don't say a lot? Word studies like that are dangerous. Why? Because the process can encourage looking at the word *itself* in isolation from the words

³ Tom Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EBTC, 489.

⁴ See, "The Urgency of our Faithfulness," here: https://cdn.subsplash.com/documents/JF89ZG/_source/f7879eff-8418-4db2-9781-67278c6f3053/document.pdf

⁵ See George Guthrie, *Hebrews*, NIVAC, 27–28.

surrounding it.⁶ Can you imagine someone 100 years from now—who speaks a different language—word—studying these two sentences from the first page of this sermon? “Why is a huge mirror hanging in a tree? Because that hill is a blind hill.” Well, the hill is blind. “Blind” means you can’t see. Is that why the mirror is in the tree? To help the hill?

It's not hard to see the danger of word studies done in isolation from the context. Words have ranges of meaning that are clarified by the context of the words that surround it.

How does this manifest itself here in Hebrews 6? Much of the debate in this text is whether or not the author is addressing Christians, almost Christians, or unbelievers. And that debate hinges in large part on these particular words in verses 4–6. What does “once” mean? Does that mean “once and for all”? Or does that mean “at one point in time” they were enlightened?⁷ Or, what does “taste” mean? Is it to experience to a certain degree, but *not* to consume fully?⁸ Is it “partaker” or is it “companion” of the Holy Spirit?⁹

Why is there so much interest in figuring out what these words in verses 4 and 5 mean? Because of what this passage goes on to say of those that have once been enlightened, have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted of the heavenly gift.¹⁰ I'll read verse 5: **and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance.**

So, I mentioned in the update this week that I read a few Arminian commentators on this verse. How do *they* interpret verses 4–6? To them it's clear: it's possible for believers to lose their salvation. They've tasted. They've *been made* partakers. And this passage says, if they have *that*, and *then* fall away, **it is impossible to renew them again to repentance.** To those that deny the perseverance of the saints, it's an open and shut case.

Of course, the only verse in this passage that clearly identifies what belongs to salvation is verse 9. And, as we'll soon see, in that verse, the author concludes the exact opposite. It's not *only* that many have lifted verses 4–6 out of the argument of the entire book, it's that they don't even consider all of Hebrews 6.

But that does lead us to the other consideration I mentioned earlier. Considering the function of the warning passages in the book of Hebrews alleviates some of the tension. How do they function? The Lord uses warnings as means to spur believers to perseverance. But as a second consideration, clarifying what aspect of salvation Hebrews emphasizes alleviates a little more of the tension within these verses.

So, how does Hebrews describe salvation, or being saved? Well, to be blunt, it's *not* how the revivalist Southern Baptist used the word in the church I spent my high school years in. In that particular pulpit, salvation was almost exclusively past or present. The questions were two: “Have you been saved?” and “Are you saved?”

While those aren't bad questions, they're not quite robust enough for this passage. Because, to the author of Hebrews,¹¹ salvation is not *merely* past nor present, it's future-oriented as well. For example, the first time the word “salvation” occurs is in Hebrews 1, when the author writes, **Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will**

⁶ Words have ranges of meaning, as I've said more than once. There's a “bat” at the Memphis Zoo. There's a “bat” at AutoZone Park. And there's a way your spouse might “bat” her eyes at you. All three can knock you down, but “bat” doesn't mean the same thing in each instance. Word studies often, not always, forget that.

⁷ Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT,

⁸ Stephen Witmer, *The Preacher's Greek Companion to Hebrews*, 194.

⁹ HCSB

¹⁰ The ESV actually begins verse 4 with the clause of verse 6 in the NASB.

¹¹ And in many other parts of the New Testament.

inherit salvation? So, while maybe word studies are *less* definitive in pinpointing meaning, it's likely that the tense of a verb is *more* important than what we've heard.

To explain further, if the Bible says something about salvation being in the future tense, that is, you *will* inherit salvation, that means there's a sense in which we're still waiting. Salvation has come to us, yes, but the full measure of salvation has not *yet* come. That's what Hebrews 1 emphasizes. This future aspect of salvation is also found in Hebrews 9:28: **Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of man, will appear a second time for salvation.** Has that happened yet? No, it's future.

Further, the warning passages in the book of Hebrews contain "if" clauses that also point to aspects of salvation being in the future. Again, we don't interpret Hebrews 6 *apart* from the other warning passages, all of which argue that salvation is an inheritance that one day comes to those that *have* persevered.¹² In Hebrews 3:6: **Christ was faithful as a Son over His house—whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end.** Later in chapter 3, **For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance until the end** (3:14).

Why is that an important consideration to understand this passage? Because the author of Hebrews doesn't assume a divine perspective of their ultimate fate.¹³ He can't see their heart. He certainly can't see its nooks and crannies over the next thirty years. If the aspect of salvation he's emphasizing in the book of Hebrews is *future*, he's *not* implying they weren't saved in the past. Nor is he asking them to look back introspectively to try and discern whether their conversion experience was true. That's not the point of the text. He's not looking *back* at all. In this warning, he's looking forward.

And what does He say? Again, keep in mind that verb tenses are important for interpretation. There are a couple important verbs in verse 6, which says: **It is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.** What's the verb tense that clarifies some of this passage? Both the verb for "crucify" and for **put Him to open shame** are present tense verbs. Why is that significant? Because both speak to an ongoing action.¹⁴ The ESV captures this a bit more clearly. Why is it that can't they be renewed again to repentance? **They are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding Him**—that is, *continuing* to hold Him—**up to contempt.**

In other words, as the author warns, he's not describing a one-time fall. He's not describing a short season of disobedience. He's not *even* describing a period of dryness. He's talking about someone that—in the *future*—chooses to walk away, and then *stays* away, and then *continues* to reject. It's impossible for that person to repent since—because—he or she *continues* to reject. You can't reject and repent at the same time.¹⁵

The Lord uses this forward-looking warning as a means toward perseverance. Again, to borrow from Spurgeon, if you drink the arsenic, you will die.

To hear it rightly, we also ought to keep in mind the genre and purpose of the letter. The book of Hebrews is a sermon. And the author is a preacher, exhorting a congregation waffling under persecution. So, though they might *claim* Christ, the one addressing them doesn't have divine knowledge. His knowledge of their hearts is actually quite limited. So, what can he do? What *must* he do? Warn.

¹² Schreiner, *The Race*, 202.

¹³ Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 180

¹⁴ Harris, 138; Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 189; Harold Attridge, *Hebrews*, 172, "could indicate a continuous and obdurate stance toward Christ,"; Guthrie, 220.

¹⁵ Some even contend that "while" is a better word choice than "since." See Guthrie and Harris.

In this light, we might consider *all* the options commentators debate ad nauseum. Is he warning unbelievers? Is he warning those that are “almost Christians?”¹⁶ Is he warning believers? A better question might be, “Do any of those categories of people *not* need to hear this word?”

We can raise both flags up the pole. Regarding preservation: if you’ve trusted Christ, you cannot lose your salvation. Romans 8, 1 Peter 1, John 6, Ephesians 1, Psalm 121, the character of God, the efficacy of the cross, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the eternal priesthood of the Ascended Christ, all shout that God keeps His own. We will not budge on that. You’d have to rip out of most of your Bible to argue otherwise.

But I can also say, because the Bible says, if you walk away from Christ, and you persist in doing so for the next 30 years, you *will* not be saved.

And there’s a lot of that happening in our day. Some would say we’re currently experiencing the largest and fastest religious shift in the history of our country.¹⁷ All of us know someone that has walked away. And they are continuing to stay away. Maybe you’ve felt the pull yourself. So, let’s hear Hebrews 6 rightly. We shouldn’t blunt the force of it. Whether you profess Christ or not, if you’re 18, if you’re 38, if you’re 65, and you feel the pull to dabble in sin for a bit, thinking you’ll keep your options open. I mean, you can always just come back to the truth later.

Who says you will? Who says your heart won’t deceive you?

That’s the warning about perseverance. Note secondly,

2. An Illustration of Perseverance (vv. 7–8)

The illustration clarifies the meaning.¹⁸ Verse 7 begins with that word that marks explanation, “for”: **For ground that drinks the rain which often falls on it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God.**

I was looking out the front window a few weeks back and Julie said, “What are you looking at?” I said, “Grass.” Don’t drive by and mock, but I’m presently pleased with the lawn. Full disclosure: Julie’s dad—quite the experienced farmer—helped me with it back in October. We applied lime to the soil to increase the pH, spread a good bit of fertilizer, and scattered seed indiscriminately. During the process, Julie’s dad said a couple of perfect one-liners. After we emptied the sacks of seed on the front yard, he said, “better out *there* than in the bag.” Then he said, “Now we just need a good rain.” And in a couple days, that’s exactly what we got. And now, even though the leaves annoyingly keep falling, you could brush some of that fescue with a comb.

The Lord—in mercy—has shown us things about Himself in creation. There’s a certain ground that drinks the rain and brings forth vegetation. The Old Testament is full of this language. Not insignificantly, the Lord Jesus used this kind of language in Matthew 13 to speak of conversion. There’s good soil in which seed prospers.

And then there is seed that falls on other soil. I do still have a number of spots in my yard that struggle to grow grass, and *some* of it is because rock washes off a brick patio *into* that soil. What does Jesus say about the effect of seed in rocky soil? Because it has no root, it withers away (Mt. 13:6). What does that rocky soil represent? I don’t think the author of Hebrews was unaware of this answer: **This is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away** (Mt. 13:20–21).

¹⁶ This is Wayne Grudem’s position.

¹⁷ <https://www.9marks.org/review/book-review-the-great-dechurching-by-jim-davis-michael-graham/>

¹⁸ Peter O’Brien, *God Has Spoken in His Son*, 173.

Like Matthew 13, in this illustration from Hebrews 6, there's contrast. Some ground drinks the rain and brings forth vegetation. Other ground drinks the rain and yields something else, something we read about in Genesis 3.¹⁹ Verse 8: **But if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.** Note that the illustration points to the future as well. The ground is not *yet* cursed, but *close* to it. And if it persists in drinking the rain and yielding thorns, v. 8, it **ends up being burned.** The Lord Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount making the same point, **every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire** (Mt. 7:19).²⁰

The illustration makes the same point as verses 4–6. There's ground that drinks the rain and produces fruit. And there's ground that drinks the rain and doesn't. Note, finally,

3. An Application for Perseverance (vv. 9–12)

We've noted that the Lord uses warnings as a means to perseverance. But that's not all He uses to encourage perseverance. He also uses promise.²¹

Verse 9 begins the move that direction: **But, beloved.** This is the only place in the book of Hebrews the author uses this word to describe the congregation he addresses.²² Though he just said some hard things, though he's been quite frank, that does *not* mean his affection is absent. Many around us have so distorted "love" that their sure that warning is unloving. "If you loved me, you'd just accept what I do, agree with how I live, assent to how I think." But, in fact, the path of least resistance in the face of sin is often the *unloving* path. The author of Hebrews warns, and at the same time, loves.

And then, in love, he exhorts, **But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you.** "Better" is Hebrews' refrain. Christ is better than the angels. He's better than Moses. He's better than the High Priest. And, because of that, chapter 6 tells us there are **better things concerning you.** What are those "better" things? Verse 9 continues, **things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way.** The conditional warnings, in some sense, appeal to our minds to conceive or imagine the consequences for those that fall away.²³ But verse 9 makes clear that falling away is *not* what accompanies true salvation.

Why is that? Verse 10 explains: **For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and your love which you have shown toward His name.** So, if we recall the illustration, which ground are they? They're the soil that drinks the rain and brings forth vegetation. And God is not so unjust to forget the work and love they've shown toward His name.

We might ask, "How was this love for His name manifested? Was it merely internal? Merely private?" Note this clause in verse 10 again, **your love which you have shown toward His name.** There's something seen—we might say demonstrable—to their labor and love. In verse 10 the love is **shown toward His name.** And in verse 11, the author writes, **and we desire that each one of you show the same diligence.**

How are they showing it? Not only is it not *merely* private, it's not *merely* personal. Verse 10: **For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and your love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints.**

¹⁹ Exact form of the words of Gen. 3:18 in the Greek Old Testament.

²⁰ John the Baptist told us the Who would do it: **His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire** (Mt. 3:12).

²¹ Schreiner, *The Race*, 203.

²² O'Brien, 174.

²³ Schreiner, *The Race*, 199.

Some of what gives the author confidence concerning their salvation is the way these believers ministered to and served one another. It's not a stretch to say—either biblically or experientially—that falling away from the Lord often, if not always, means a falling away from God's people. If we want to persevere, or if we want *evidence* that we're persevering, we do so together.

The author even links assurance to this demonstrated love in verse 11. Hear the purpose clause at the end: **and we desire that each one of you show the same diligence, so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end.** The author of Hebrews doesn't warn the readers of this book so that they'd have *less* assurance. He warns them so that they'd be sobered, so that they'd heed the warning, so that they'd hear and depend upon Christ again, draw near His people, all in order to have full assurance of hope all the way to the end.

Conclusion

Last week's text described the readers as dull of hearing (5:11). This week's passage ends with the same language, translated in verse 12, **so that you will not be sluggish.**

What's the alternative? It's the pressing on to maturity. It's the life of faith that God's people have trod for generations. Verse 12 ends, admonishing us not be dull of hearing, or sluggish, **but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.** Those that went before us inherited through faith *and* patience, what we might call a persevering faith.²⁴

So, hear the warning. Push away the arsenic. Raise the flag of perseverance.

But, also, hear the promise. Raise the flag of preservation. His warnings *always* accomplish His purpose in the lives of those He purchased. We're convinced of better things concerning you.

²⁴ Harris, 145.