

## What Does “It’s Impossible for Those Who Fall Away to be Brought to Repentance” Mean in Hebrews 6?

The following verses from Hebrews 6:4-8 have vexed Bible readers since they were penned:

**4 It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, 5 who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age 6 and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. 7 Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. 8 But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.**

The authors declaration of the impossibility of restoring a person who has fallen away must be understood in the shadow of the Temple and the blood sacrifices that the recipients of this letter were being tempted to return to, having at one time repented of them. This passage, as with the whole book, is centered around the idea that its necessary for ethnic Jews of the first century AD to cease from offering blood sacrifices in the wake of Jesus’ death. Having heard that Jesus’ blood alone is sufficient to secure our position of privilege before God, these people of whom the author is referring, turned away FROM offering the blood of animals for a season only to resort back TO them. Christ, who is the substance from which those shadows (8:5) of sacrifices were cast was being declared by these people to be of no value to them now having at one time turned from Judaism to trust in His blood. Their trust was fleeting, fleshly and fake as proven by their renewed trust in the blood of bulls in goats.

Bear in mind that these people had seen the death of Jesus with their eyes, had heard the preaching of the apostles with their ears and who had experienced the supernatural environment of awakening in the wake of Pentecost. This was an audience who was living in between the crucifixion of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. They were the most privileged people in human history to have beheld Jesus in the flesh and to have heard the Spirit-saturated preaching of the apostles in the wake of His resurrection. Thus, they were “enlightened” and had “tasted” of the “word of God” and the “powers of the age to come” by virtue of the fact that they were in proximity to Jesus and the apostles during those watershed decades. They weren’t partaking of Christ in a saving way but rather benefiting from living in that place at that time during that monumental outpouring.

In the end, these people were comparable to fallow soil who couldn’t absorb water but could only produce thorns and thistles (6:7-8) regardless of how much water was poured upon it. They drank deeply and tasted amply of the benefits of the Gospel only to turn from it with the full assurance that Jesus wasn’t enough and that His blood was insufficient.

The falling away spoken of here is the same sort of falling away that we see in John 6 after the feeding of the thousands. They weren't genuine believers who had been born of the Spirit and who had knit themselves to Jesus with strong bonds of personal affection. Consider the landscape of John 6. Multitudes were clinging to Jesus in the midst of the surging of the power of the Spirit that was breaking out through His ministry. They were basking in the glory of His miracle working power and physically, emotionally and spiritually taking advantage of all that was offered to them in Christ; or so it seemed. For in a moment, the crowds departed, their affections turned to offense and their praise turns to protest. Here's why: they couldn't come to terms with the idea that they needed to "eat His flesh and drink His blood." Thus they fell away and left His presence in droves. They loved His preaching and they coveted His miracles – until they were forced to bind themselves to exclusive message of the blood of the Lamb. They treasured Him because they ate the bread that they craved but they hated Him because of the blood they were told they needed. And here is the take-away point: the primary reason they departed from His company was because they saw His blood as of no value. Thus, they were proverbially crucifying Him.

The crowds of John 6 are the same as the people of Hebrews 6. They benefited greatly from the power and presence of God that saturated Israel between the time of Jesus' emergence from the wilderness in Luke 4 through to the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost and beyond.

The author was saying that it is impossible to see these people restored to repentance if they had seen Jesus bleed and rise from the grave and if they'd drunk deeply of the apostle's ministry only to conclude that blood sacrifices are still necessary. This is why the author would emphasize the fact that there will never be "another sacrifice" for sin after the shedding of Jesus' blood. This was the central issue during that hour of history as the Spirit was declaring the cessation of the blood sacrifices.

The moment we apply this passage generically without honoring the context or the over-arching message of the book, we distort the text. This proposition about the impossibility of renewal was specific to that audience, in that timeframe, in that geographical region at that dramatic transitional moment of redemptive history when the Jews were being called to "repent of [the] dead works" (6:1-2) of blood sacrifices and to turn to Jesus for salvation through His blood shedding. The reason these people cannot be "restored to repentance" is because repenting from blood sacrifices only to return to them is, in effect, to "crucify the Lord all over again" by declaring His death to be of no salvific significance and His blood of no redemptive value. These were people who were in the vicinity of the people of the covenant and drinking deeply of the benefits of that proximity but who were not people of the covenant themselves. If they were truly "of" the covenant, than they wouldn't "trample on the blood" (ch. 10) of that covenant by declaring it to be insufficient through the return to blood sacrifices.

When read outside of its historical context and without the call to abandon blood sacrifices clearly in view, one could be persuaded to believe that either the Lord will not receive us if we stray from Him for a season or that blood-bought, Spirit-wrought saints can see their justification annulled, their regeneration undone and their adoption terminated. And neither of these ideas are remotely Biblical.

23 Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.  
24 For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. (Hebrews 9:23-24)