

CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION

AS ILLUSTRATED IN HEBREWS 6:4-6

By Arlen L. Chitwood

“For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit,

And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world [‘age’] to come,

If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance...” (Heb. 6:4-6a).

This passage in Hebrews has been an enigma to Bible students over the years, and it is possibly the most misunderstood section of Scripture in the New Testament. But the passage is not nearly as difficult as the multiplicity of interpretations would lead one to believe. The numerous interpretations advanced by various expositors have resulted basically from two exegetical errors:

- 1) A failure to take into account *the central message of the Book of Hebrews*.
- 2) A failure to take into account *the context of Heb. 6:4-6*.

The message of the Book of Hebrews centers around “the salvation of the soul in relation to the coming kingdom” (1:1-14; 6:13-20; 10:35-39; 13:17), and *the context leading into Heb. 6:4-6* has to do with “the experiences of the Israelites under Moses” (chs. 3, 4), which is why maturity in the faith — moving from *gnosis* to *epignosis* — is in view immediately preceding Heb. 6:4-6 (5:5-6:3).

The summation of the matter is contained in chapter six; but the thought begins in chapter three, and the entire passage must be so understood.

As the Israelites under Moses (in their knowledge of God’s plans and purposes) moved from a state of *gnosis* to a state of *epignosis* in the type, Christians under Christ (in their knowledge of God’s plans and purposes) are moving from a state of *gnosis* to a state of *epignosis* in the antitype.

As the Israelites under Moses moved from Egypt toward the land of Canaan with an earthly inheritance in view, Christians under Christ are moving from the things of this world toward a land separate from this world with a heavenly inheritance in view.

As the Israelites under Moses were being prepared during the wilderness journey for entrance into the land, Christians under Christ are being prepared during the wilderness journey for entrance into the land.

As the Israelites under Moses were to go in, conquer the inhabitants of the land, and rule as God’s firstborn son here on earth at the head of the nations, Christians under Christ are to go in, be victorious over the inhabitants of the land (*cf.* Eph. 6:10-17), and, in that coming day (following the adoption [Rom. 8:14-23]), rule as God’s firstborn son from the heavens over the nations.

But, as the Israelites refused to go into the land, conquer the inhabitants, and take possession of the land (with a view to a future rule), so can Christians refuse to go into the land, be victorious over the inhabitants, and take possession of the land (with a view to a future rule).

And, just as the Israelites at this point fell away, with no possibility of being renewed again unto repentance, so can Christians at this point fall away, with no possibility of being renewed again unto repentance.

And, just as the Israelites who fell away were overthrown in the wilderness and failed to realize the goal of their calling, so will Christians who fall away after this fashion be overthrown in the wilderness and fail to realize the goal of their calling.

The words, “once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made *partakers* of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God,

and the powers of the world [‘age’] to come” (Heb. 6:4, 5), refer to a progression in growth from milk to meat to strong meat. This is a progression from the rudimentary things concerning the antitype of the death of the paschal lambs in Egypt to the strong meat associated with things surrounding the antitype of Israel’s experiences at Kadesh-Barnea (chs. 3, 4).

In the immediate context (ch. 5), “strong meat” is associated with things surrounding the Melchizedek priesthood. This priesthood refers to things beyond Kadesh-Barnea, in the land itself. Melchizedek was a king-priest, setting forth in type the office which Christ will occupy in the coming age when He, as the great King-Priest, with His “kings and priests” (Rev. 5:10), takes the kingdom.

The entire thought in Heb. 6:4-6 is a progression from *gnosis* to *epignosis*, followed by a “falling away” from *the faith*. “Eternal salvation,” which, more often than not, is read into this text, is *not* in view at all. Viewing eternal salvation as the issue under discussion is completely unnatural and will serve only to obscure the correct interpretation. If the Scriptures alone are allowed to interpret Heb. 6:4-6, the entire matter will become clear.

(Note the words, “enlightened,” “partakers,” and “have tasted” [vv. 4, 5]. These words are used elsewhere in the Book of Hebrews referring to individuals [Christians] entering into certain experiences [*cf.* 2:9; 3:1; 10:32]. The usage of these words in Heb. 6:4-6 is within the same framework. The unsaved simply cannot enter into experiences seen through the manner in which these words are used in the text.)

Impossibility of Renewal

The thought that *it is impossible* “to renew” certain apostate Christians “unto repentance” is one of *the most solemn warnings* to be found in all Scripture. *The finality* of the matter for those who apostatize in this manner is set forth by the word “impossible.” This is a *particular apostasy*, and once a Christian *has fallen away from the faith* in the manner set forth in Heb. 3-6, *he can never again* be brought back into the position which he occupied prior to his departure from the faith. (The Greek word translated “renew” refers

to being *brought back into exactly the same position previously occupied.*) In the type, Israel could not be brought back into this position; and in the antitype, neither can Christians.

The entire thought is very similar to the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in Matt. 12:22-32. This was a national sin committed by the religious leaders of Israel — not something which man, saved or unsaved, can commit today. Once the religious leaders had committed this sin, their actions brought the nation into a state from which a restoration to the previously occupied position could never occur.

At Kadesh-Barnea, however, the prohibition applied only to the present generation, twenty years old and above (this would allow the nation of Israel, at a future time, to realize the position for which the generation under Moses had been called — *an earthly calling*). In Matthew chapter twelve, anticipating Matt. 21:43, this prohibition not only applied to the present generation but to future generations as well (this would prevent the nation of Israel from ever realizing the position unto which the generation during the days of Christ and the apostles had been called — *a heavenly calling*).

One thing which must not be overlooked when considering the impossibility of renewing an apostate unto repentance, who has fallen away in the manner specified, is the fact that in the type surrounding the experiences of the Israelites at Kadesh-Barnea the nation did repent. The word “repentance” (Gk., *metanoia*) means *a change of mind*. This change of mind will lead to other things which are often mistaken for repentance (or part of repentance), but the simple, restrictive meaning of the word itself does not include these things.

(*Metanoia*, translated “repentance” in the N.T., is a compound word comprised of *meta* [“with”] and *noeo* [“to know,” or “to perceive (with the mind)”], derived from *nous* [“mind”]. *Metanoia* points to doing something with one’s mind, and that which is understood in the Greek language through the use of this word is “a change of mind.”)

Once the Israelites at Kadesh-Barnea had fallen away and had realized the consequences of their actions,

they changed their minds (repented) concerning the land of Canaan. They sought to occupy their former position, entering into and taking possession of the land, with a view to subsequently ruling over the nations.

Thus, bringing this over into the antitype, it is possible for Christians who have apostatized in this manner to also change their minds about the land set before them and seek to occupy their former position, looking ahead to the coming inheritance of the saints. However, God did not change His mind concerning that which He stated would befall apostate Israelites in the type; nor will God change His mind concerning that which He has stated will befall apostate Christians in the antitype.

After the Israelites had repented (changed their minds) at Kadesh-Barnea, the nation *failed* to regain the position which it had previously occupied. The Lord was no longer among His people to lead them victoriously into the land; and when they tried to enter, the Amalekites and Canaanites “smote them” (Num. 14:40-45).

Nor will the Lord be among like-minded apostate Christians today who repent (change their minds) and seek to occupy their former, forfeited position. They can no longer move victoriously into the land and overcome the inhabitants. If they try, as in the type, they will be overcome. The only thing awaiting Christians who have apostatized in the antitype of Israel’s Kadesh-Barnea experience is the same thing which awaited Israel — *an overthrow in the wilderness, on the right side of the blood but on the wrong side of the goal of their calling*.

The word “repentance” is only used three times in the Book of Hebrews (6:1, 6; 12:17), and two of these three times the word is used in the heart of major warnings given to Christians. Hebrews 6:4-6 is the heart of the third major warning, and Heb. 12:14-17 is the heart of the fifth major warning.

Interestingly enough, in the fifth major warning in chapter twelve, Esau did repent. He changed his mind concerning the birthright after it had been forfeited. His repentance led to a great show of emotion. The words, “he found no place of repentance,” refer to the fact that “*he found no place for a change of mind in his father*” (v. 17b, ASV). Esau sought to effect a

change of mind on the part of his father, resulting in a reversal of that which had transpired. However, such did not, it could not, occur. Isaac could not change his mind. The birthright, once forfeited, was beyond Esau’s grasp forever.

The situation in Heb. 6:4-6 is identical. The apostates in this passage cannot occupy a previously forfeited position. It is not possible, as in Esau’s case, to renew them again unto repentance. In the types — the Israelites at Kadesh-Barnea, and Esau in the presence of his father — both the Israelites and Esau repented; but, though they repented, they still found no place of repentance. That would be to say, though the Israelites changed their minds at Kadesh-Barnea, God did not change His mind (God did not repent); and, though Esau changed his mind when he appeared in Isaac’s presence, Isaac did not change his mind (Isaac did not repent).

Repentance in the fifth major warning is not on the part of the one who forfeited his birthright, for he did repent. And repentance in the third major warning, as well, cannot be on the part of the ones who fall away. In the type, the Israelites did repent, necessitating that the antitype be viewed after the same fashion. Also in the type, Israel’s repentance wrought no change in that which God had decreed; nor will a Christian’s repentance in the antitype bring about such a change.

Man turning his back upon that associated with the greatest thing God has ever designed for redeemed man — that of ascending the throne with God’s Son during the coming age — is *a serious matter*. In fact, it is *a very serious matter*; and God will deal with this matter in *an equally serious fashion*.

This is what Heb. 6:4-6, drawn from the type seen in chapters three and four, is about. *God overthrew the Israelites who fell away in the type, and He will also overthrow Christians who fall away in the antitype.*

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