

Elementary to Perfection

None of us came into this world as a mature adult, we all began as a baby. As adorable and cuddly as we were as babies, it was never expected that we would remain that way. Even before our first birthday we were being encouraged to crawl and then take that first step walking - the desire being that we would grow up and enjoy a full life as a mature adult. God has the same desire for His children. That is why He calls us to move on to maturity.

Hebrews 6:1-3

If we are going to make progress, we have to leave the childhood things behind and go forward spiritually. Hebrews 6:1 literally reads, “ Therefore, having left (once and for all) the elementary lessons (the ABCs) of the teaching of Christ.” In school, you learned your ABCs so that you could read words, then sentences, and then books - anything written. You didn’t just stick with learning the letters over and over: you learned the basics to go on to better things. No one wants to still be reciting the alphabet years years later.

The phrase “let us go on” should be translated “let us be carried forward.” It is God who enables us to progress as we hear His Word and obey it. The word “perfection” in Greek is better understood as “maturity.” Paul is not trying to say we can reach perfection in this life but we can reach a place of maturity. Philippians 2:12 exhorts us to “*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*” The Greek verb “work out” means “to continually work to bring something to completion.” We do this by “pressing on” to our goal of being more like Christ. The “trembling” is the attitude we should have in pursuing this goal—a healthy fear of offending God through disobedience and an awe and respect for His majesty and holiness. We work out our salvation by going to the very source of our salvation—the Word of God—where we renew our hearts and minds. And we know that we look to Jesus because He “*is the author and finisher of our Faith.*” (Hebrews 12:2)

Paul then mentions six foundational truths of the Christian life which by the way are also foundational to Jewish faith.

<p>Six Basic Principles</p>	<p>Judaism Foreshadowing of what was to come Old Testament</p>	<p>Christianity Fulfillment of beliefs in Christ New Testament</p>
<p>Repentance from dead works</p>	<p>The works referred to Mosaic Law; they were continually trying to keep the Law, then breaking it, then repenting.</p>	<p>True repentance is changing one’s mind about sin to the point of turning from it; Mosaic Law ended when Jesus (the Messiah) died.</p>
<p>Faith toward God</p>	<p>The Old Testament taught faith in God, so just believing in God didn’t show much spiritual growth. They expressed their faith by ritual - approaching God through temple sacrifices.</p>	<p>A once and for all turning to Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice.</p>

Doctrine of baptisms	Refers to the washings of Old Testament rituals and there were many of them - not just one.	While water can never wash away sin, baptism is a symbol of our spiritual cleansing.
Laying on of hands	When a man brought an animal offering, he laid his hands on its head to signify his identification with it. The animal was taking his place on the altar of sacrifice.	After Christ, the laying on of hands symbolized the sharing of some blessing or the setting apart of a person for ministry.
Resurrection of the dead	Was taught about in the Old Testament	Proven through the death and resurrection of Jesus
Eternal Judgement	Was taught about in the Old Testament	Jesus is the eternal judge

Since there were so many similarities between the two, many Hebrews felt they could hang on to both. They didn't really want to abandon Christianity, they just wanted to downplay the parts that made them distinctly Christian so they would face less persecution. Paul was warning them that their subtle denial of Jesus had them moving backward instead of growing in maturity. Ultimately, he is once again telling them again that Jesus is superior to their old way.

Hebrews 6:4-6

Every commentary I read identifies these verses as probably the most difficult in the Bible to understand with no explanation everyone agrees on. There are 16 different views including:

- the people were truly saved and then permanently lost
- the people were professing to be Christians but were not real believers
- “impossible” just means “difficult” - not really impossible
- it was a purely hypothetical situation that could not happen
- it only refers to the Hebrews

Rather than wading through the possibilities and perhaps bringing more confusion than clarity, I decided we would focus on two possible ideas about the identity of the people Paul is talking about. He does state that it is **impossible** for this group to ever repent again if they fall away. Looking at other scriptures in Hebrews, we can see that **impossible** means there is absolutely no possibility - none at all.

It is **impossible** for God to lie (Hebrews 6:18)

It is **impossible** for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin (Hebrews 10:4)

It is **impossible** to please God without faith (Hebrews 11:6)

Notice Paul doesn't say “if they fall” but “but if they fall away.” There is a difference. None of us is perfect and we do fall into sin. As Paul said in Romans 7:19, “*For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice.*” We all know this struggle but we also know there is forgiveness when we confess our sins. Jesus goes after the lost lamb to bring him back to the fold; the prodigal son is forgiven and restored when he returns to his father. Those who slip or fall can repent and come back. Paul is referring to those who “fall away” - become apostate. They have renounced Christianity altogether and

returned to their previous sinful ways without any remorse. It is a conscious decision. Peter in his denial of Christ would be a perfect example of falling and Judas in his betrayal would be the perfect example of falling away. Repentance was available to Peter and he sought it but there was none for Judas.

One interpretation identifies the people Paul is talking about as Christians who were truly saved but then became permanently lost. But can this really happen? A “Christian” is not a person who has said a prayer, been raised in a Christian family, or gone to church every week. These things can be a part of your Christian experience, but they are not what makes you a Christian. A Christian is a person who has fully trusted in Jesus Christ as their only Savior and has the Holy Spirit living in him. He abides in Christ and Christ abides in Him. Looking at scripture what does God say about us? Can we lose our salvation?

We are redeemed *“Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.”* (1 Peter 1:18–19) The word *redeemed* refers to a purchase being made, a price being paid. We were purchased by God at an extremely high price - the death of His only Son.

We are promised eternal life *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* (John 3:16). God promises that when we believe we receive eternal life. That means forever - so it can’t be taken away once it has been given.

A Christian is marked by God and sealed by the Spirit *“In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.”* (Ephesians 1:13–14). At the moment of faith, the new Christian is marked and sealed with the Spirit, who was promised to act as a deposit to *guarantee* our heavenly inheritance. The down payment has been made and God will follow through with the purchase.

We cannot be removed from God’s hand *“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand.”* (John 10:27-29) Nothing can take us from God’s hand - He will never let go.

We cannot be cast out *“All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and him who comes to Me I shall by no means cast out.”* (John 6:37) Even when we fail, which we all do, repentance and forgiveness are still available to the child of God. Look at Peter. He not only fell when he denied Jesus, he also blasphemed saying “I don’t know the man.” He went out and wept bitterly and God did not cast him out. Peter found forgiveness, was restored, and used greatly by God to spread the gospel. Satan loves to accuse us when we fall - telling us, “This time you really took it too far. God won’t forgive you or love you any more. You’re out now!” Don’t ever receive that accusation because God tells us in I John 1:9 that, *“if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive and cleanse us from ALL our unrighteousness.”*

We cannot lose the gift of salvation *“For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”* (Roman 11:29) Or as the NLT says, *“For God’s gifts and his call can never be withdrawn.”* He has given us the gifts of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life and He will never take them back.

A second interpretation identifies Paul’s group as those who have been influenced by the gospel and shown outward signs of being Christians, but actually were not. They were enlightened by knowledge of Jesus but halted short of full faith in Him. Not committing fully made it easier for them to return to the

practices of Judaism. Paul says who were once “enlightened” and who had “tasted” the goodness of God’s word and heavenly gift. To “taste” doesn’t necessarily mean they drank deeply. To *see* the light is not necessarily to *walk* in the light. It’s possible, then, that Paul could be saying that people who simply hang around Christianity without making a firm commitment can eventually become immune to the power of its message. They become dull of hearing which he mentioned in the previous chapter. He was greatly concerned with those stuck in the “elementary principles” of the faith (Hebrews 6:1), who never move on to “perfection” and fruitful maturity. They are like the seed that falls on rocky soil that Jesus spoke of: it sprouts immediately in the shallow earth, but withers away as soon as the sun gets hot (Matthew 13:5, 6) or in this case, when persecution began.

This person is also described as a “partaker” of the Holy Spirit (Greek *metochos*; “one who shares in; partner, companion, comrade”) They may have even exhibited gifts of the Spirit. I Corinthians 13:1 says, *“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.”*

It is clear from the Bible that there are people who made professions of faith in Jesus Christ but never genuinely received Him as Savior. They were pretend believers. Those who turn away from Christ never really trusted Him to begin with, as 1 John 2:19 says, *“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.”* They may have been religious and put on a good show, but were never born again by the power of God. In any church today, there may be true, born-again believers side by side with pretenders—those who enjoy the messages, the music, and the fellowship but have never repented of their sins and accepted Christ by faith. To the human eye, the true believer and the pretender can look identical. But not to God: He alone sees the heart.

Jesus warns us in Matthew 7, to *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.”* and then He follows up with, *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, .. And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”* There will be people who thought they were Christians who will be shocked when one day Jesus will deny He ever knew them.

So why would it be impossible for these to come back to repentance? Because they turned their backs on the very truths that would allow them to repent: Jesus is the only way to true repentance and they have rejected Him. When a person chooses against Christ and turns back to the way of the world, he says in effect, “I think what the world offers is better than Christ.” Just like those who crucified Jesus, they deny His deity. What could shame Christ more than to have someone taste his goodness and wisdom and power and then say, “No, there is something better and more to be desired.”

What can we take away from these verses today? We all come to Jesus as babes in Christ but we shouldn’t be content to stay that way. He expects us to grow as we spend time with Him in prayer and His word and as we learn to obey Him. He must increase and we must decrease. God wants us to love Him with all our hearts and let our obedience flow from a heartfelt desire to be pleasing in His sight. He wants us to desire Him and His kingdom more than the world. He will guide our way if we just look to Him. He exhorts us to remain faithful to the end and to stand firm. Our lives should bring glory to Him.

Hebrews 6:7-8

The rain falls on the ground just like God’s word falls on the ears of those who hear it. One field produces fruit and receives blessings from God. One life produces a heartfelt response to God’s word. The

other field produces only thorns and thistles. The other life allows God's word to go by unheeded. The Word He speaks to all of us is the same; what matters is how we respond to it. John 15:5 says, "*I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.*" When we abide in Christ and bear much fruit, we are in no danger of falling away.

Hebrews 6:9-12

In these last verses, the warning is followed by words of encouragement and hope. Verse 9 in the NLT says, "*Dear friends, even though we are talking this way, we really don't believe it applies to you. We are confident that you are meant for better things, things that come with salvation.*" Though he had spoken severely to them, Paul believes that the readers of his letter will continue on with Jesus. The danger the Hebrews faced was not so much out of planned rebellion as it was their great discouragement. They needed the warning but they were also in dire need of some encouragement. When we are discouraged we often think that God has forgotten about us and what we have done for Him. Paul reminds them that God is just and he always sees and remembers. People may forget your work and labor of love, but God never will.

Lastly, like a coach, Paul encourages them to press on; to show diligence and do not become sluggish. Don't be lazy about reading God's Word. Don't be lazy about hearing the Word of God. When you become lazy in these areas it will diminish your hope. Paul told the Romans, "*For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.*"

He tells them to imitate those who through faith and patience inherited God's promises. Hebrews 11:6 says, "*But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.*" We must have faith in God, faith in His Word, and faith to know God is able to keep the promises He made. What He has promised, He is able to perform. We must also have patience along with the faith. God doesn't always respond the minute we pray. Abraham waited 25 years for God to keep His promise concerning Isaac. Romans 4 tells us "*against all hope*" - when everybody else would have assumed there was no possibility of this happening - "*Abraham in hope believed.*" It also tells us, "*Abraham never wavered in believing God's promise. In fact, his faith grew stronger, and in this he brought glory to God.*" God often delays His answer in order to develop our character and bring us to maturity. This is when we need to hold on to His promises the most and don't let go. Believe the promise and then wait patiently for God to keep His Word.

II Corinthians 13:5 encourages us to "*examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine.*" In light of Paul's teaching to the Hebrews, here are some questions we might ask ourselves in terms of our own walk:

- Are we growing and maturing or are we stagnant?
- Are we sliding back towards the influences of the world or are we pressing onward in the things of God?
- Are we bringing glory to God or shame in the way we conduct our lives?

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.

Colossians 2:6-7

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