

Warning to Christians Against Falling Away

Matthew Henderson



“let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1 NAS95)

Introduction

The Bible is a precious gift. In addition to the good news it heralds, that Jesus has paid the price for our transgressions with His own blood, and how through Him alone we might stand justified before God, in its pages we also find instructions about how to live our new life in Christ in such a way that we might please Him (2 Corinthians 5:9, Colossians 1:10, 2 Timothy 2:4, Hebrews 11:6, 1 John 3:22). The Bible is written for our benefit, that we may be fully qualified and equipped for every good work (1 Timothy 3:16-17). Its life-giving instructions, written through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, have been preserved for us for almost two thousand years. Each person, then, should give the utmost attention, as of the gravest concern, to heed these precious words which teach how to remain in a relationship with the One who has been so merciful and generous to us, while we yet stood as sinners before Him.

For Christians, the Bible sweetly calls us to both contemplate and rejoice in the unmatched love of our Lord, and urges, with deepest concern for our souls, that we not take that love for granted in such a way that we divide ourselves from Him. The Hebrew writer exhorts his brothers and sisters in Christ:

“Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.” (Hebrews 3:12 NAS95)

The Hebrew Warnings

There are, I believe, five stark warnings in Hebrews to caution Christians against falling away from the faith. It seems to me that the strongest of them that stands opposed to the idea that suggests Christians cannot fall away is the following:

“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, and then have fallen away, 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.” (Hebrews 6:4–6 NAS95)

Notice, that these individuals have:

1. once been enlightened
2. tasted of the heavenly gift
3. been made partakers of the Holy Spirit
4. tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come

Notice as well that they “have fallen away,” and for such ones “it is impossible to renew them again to repentance.”

It is absolutely clear that these individuals are Christians because of the four identifying markers he uses to describe them.

First, they have “once been enlightened.” They have heard and believed the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. In fact, the writer uses this same word, “enlightened,” in chapter 10 while reminding them that they have a “better possession” because of the things they have endured:

“But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one. Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.” (Hebrews 10:32–35 NAS95)

Second, they have “tasted of the heavenly gift.” What is the gift if not connected to salvation? There are many gifts of God, and to just be alive means to be in possession of them: our life’s breathe, the beating of our heart, the sun and rain, the beauty of creation, etc. However, to speak of the heavenly gift in such a context requires that we read it with a view to our eternal salvation, and all the gifts associated with God’s grace: our justification, our sanctification, our better and lasting possession, and every other good gift in Christ Jesus.

Third, they have “been made partakers of the Holy Spirit.” The Bible has shown that the Holy Spirit has in past times used the lost to bring glory to God, but of which of the numbers of the lost has one ever been given that glorious title, “partaker” of the Holy Spirit?

Wrapping up with this text, the “good word of God and the powers of the age to come,” which these individuals had “tasted,” seem to be gifts which are irrefutably the exclusive domain of God’s people.

Because we must admit that this passage is clearly addressing Christians, we must also admit that Christians are charged with a solemn warning against falling away to the loss of the salvation they once attained through faith (Ephesians 2:8).

Demas, Simon, and Jezebel

In addition to such forthright warnings, the New Testament uses the examples of certain individuals to serve as strong warnings to Christians (God's elect) to be on guard against falling away.

An example of a specific individual who we see fall away is Paul's companion, Demas. In Colossians 4:14, and Philemon 24, Demas is presented as a fellow worker of Paul, sending his greetings to his fellow Christians, the first recipients of those letters. However, as Paul nears the end of his life, heart-broken, he writes:

“Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica” (2Timothy 4:10 NAS95)

A second example would be Simon (Acts 8:9ff), a former magician of Samaria, who was converted to Christ and was quickly afterwards entangled in sin. He is warned strongly to seek repentance for the thoughts of his heart (Acts 8:22).

Finally, there is the case of the woman identified as Jezebel, and her followers, in the Lord's message to Thyatira. In it the Lord says:

“But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. ‘I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality. ‘Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds.” (Revelation 2:20–22 NAS95)

Like the failings of the Israelite's in the wilderness, the failures of these individuals are preserved for us as a warning to not lose our reward by opposing God through our conduct, or giving up the faith.

The Galatian Letter

The book of Galatians is written to Christians who are in danger of falling away. Paul starts his appeal to them by saying:

“I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel;” (Galatians 1:6 NAS95)

The teachers of such a message are strongly rebuked by Paul, who writes that any who carry such a message, man or angel, is anathema.

It is clear, as with our case in Hebrews, that these are genuine Christians who are to heed this warning from Paul. He writes:

“This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Galatians 3:2–3 NAS95)

He goes on further to tell them in no uncertain terms they are in Christ:

“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” (Galatians 3:26–27 NAS95)

But, an opportunity to turn back from their sonship has been presented to them through the false message spoken of in chapter 1, which some have fallen prey to, and others are still in danger of believing and acting upon:

“But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.” (Galatians 4:9–11 NAS95)

Paul leaves no opportunity for misunderstanding that they are in danger of losing the salvation they possess through Christ when he writes to them:

“Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you.” (Galatians 5:2 NAS95)

Undoubtedly, some of their number had already fallen, and Paul was calling on them to remember and be restored to their first love in this letter:

“You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.” (Galatians 5:4 NAS95)

Warnings Against Continuing in Sin

Finally, we have many, many warnings against the eternal dangers of remaining sinful as Christians.

Paul makes several representative lists of sins in his letters to Christians, reminding us that we are called to live a new life. One such list is in Galatians 5:19-21. Of this list, Paul says to these same Christians which he has been appealing to stand firm in Christ:

“I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:21 NAS95)

Peter, too, sternly warns Christians to not be caught up in the sin which they have escaped through the blood of Christ. Writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he vividly compares such individuals to dogs who return to their own vomit:

“For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, “A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT,” and, “A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.”” (2Peter 2:20–22 NAS95)

Of which of the lost could we dare say they had “escaped the defilements of the world” without Christ? There is no forgiveness of sins outside of Christ (John 3:36, et al.). These, then, are Peter’s brothers and sisters in Christ to whom this warning is given. They are Christians in danger of giving up their hope in Christ – their salvation.

Conclusion

Paul reminded the Christians in Corinth that God's own people, who He had brought out of Egypt, fell in the wilderness and were prevented from entering the promised land – the facts of which were recorded for our instruction. Then, just after that reminder, he left this warning for them, for us today, and for Christians of all time:

“Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.”
(1Corinthians 10:12 NAS95)

So, let us hold fast to that commitment which we have made to our Lord, and charge our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ to “run in such a way that [we] may win” (1 Corinthians 9:24 NAS95) “the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1 NAS95), that we may together with Paul “[finish] the course, . . . [having] kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7 NAS95).

For those running the race, “peace be to you all who are in Christ” (1Peter 5:14 NAS95).