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A Study of Hebrews 6:4-8By **HERBERT H. HOHENSTEIN****THE PASSAGE IN THE GENERAL SETTING
OF THE WHOLE EPISTLE**

ANY effort to determine the relationship of this passage to the entire epistle must necessarily consider both the occasion and the purpose of the letter. There is one outstanding theme, the finality and perfection of the Christian religion. Christ, God's Son, has come down to give the climactic and clearest revelation of the God in whose bosom He has lain and to redeem mankind to this God whom He reveals. He who would hear this final Word of God must hear it in the Son. Not to listen is to die. Yes, to grow cold in attention to that Word is dangerous, and if such a habit is not corrected, it can become fatal to that faith which alone maintains men in the right covenant relationship with God.

It is just this apostasy which seems to have threatened this letter's addressees. That is shown by the repeated warnings against unbelief, indifference, coldness, laxity in faith and faithfulness, which fall like hammer blows again and again throughout the entire letter (3:6; 3:14; 4:4; 10:23; 12:1; 12:3).

The peril of apostasy under the stress of persecution . . . indifference as to Christian faith . . . a sense of disappointment at the failure of the promises to reach fulfillment . . . the wearing out of the first enthusiasm. . . . For these and other reasons, sluggishness and indifference were creeping into the church, and a stirring declaration of the folly and the peril of such decline was urgently demanded.

The purpose of Hebrews was thus above all things a practical purpose. The cold and indifferent among those to whom this Christian leader writes, must be shamed out of their torpor and neglect, and roused to a new consciousness of the transcendent worth of that which they still possessed, but were likely to lose. This, and not their theological instruction, or adjustment to the

downfall of Judaism, is the idea which dominates every part of the letter, and it is this that explains the fact that admonition and practical exhortation are so constantly interwoven with teaching in the epistle. Hebrews is thus to be understood not as a treatise upon the relation of Christianity to Judaism . . . but as an impassioned oration, wholly centered upon recalling to steadfast devotion to Christ weary and wavering disciples.¹

Viewed in such a light, the passage under study and chapter 10:26-31 become the two most incisive warnings against the peril of apostasy and its fatal fruit of death beyond recall. For it is by portraying such a possible fall in such ghastly colors that the writer hopes to rouse the listless readers of his letter from their dullness and to inspire them to press forward away from the black pit of unbelief.

THE PASSAGE IN ITS IMMEDIATE CONTEXT

From chapter 4:14 through chapter 7 the writer develops the theme "Jesus the Great High Priest, His Person and Superiority." It would seem, then, that 5:11—6:20 is an extended exhortation to faith in, and faithfulness to, Jesus, the High Priest. We might consider 6:4-8 as the climactic warning of this larger exhortatory section. From 4:14—5:7 the writer takes great pains to bring out the surpassing greatness of Jesus as the perfect High Priest. He would like to develop the thought to an even greater degree, but he feels that it is impossible because of the dullness and the spiritual immaturity of his readers (5:11-14).

This lack of faith requires immediate remedial action. So it is that in a manner characteristic of the whole epistle, the writer ceases to teach and begins to warn and encourage.

He bids them, therefore, dismiss for the present the subjects which had engaged their attention when they were catechumens (6:1-3). . . . It was not his present purpose—it ought to be quite unnecessary now—to remind them once more of such rudimentary truths as the difference between faith and works; the distinction between Jewish ablutions and Christian Baptism; the meaning of imposition of hands; the truths of the resurrection of the body and the sentence of the world to come. They could not need such teachings as this—unless, indeed, they were in danger of apostasy. Of the peril of such apostasy he gives them the most solemn warning.²

Not only does the writer make it known that he will not "lay another foundation" of the beginnings of faith, he also states that such an act is impossible if this immaturity leads to apostasy. "The connection between this passage and the foregoing, therefore, is that to rest content with their present elementary hold upon the Christian truth is to have an inadequate grasp of it; the force of temptation is so strong that this rudimentary acquaintance with it will not prevent them from falling away all together, and the one thing to ensure their religious position is to see the full meaning of what Jesus is and does."³

The verses immediately following 6:4-8 present a decided contrast to the stern warning of vv. 4-8. The writer simply cannot bring himself to believe that those to whom he writes have fallen into such a fate. "Therefore he hastens to assure them that he cherishes hopeful thoughts of their present and future state, calling them, in this solitary instance, 'beloved,' as if to make amends for the severity of his rebuke, and declaring that he fully expects to see realized in their experience the better alternative of the foregoing contrast—fruitfulness connected with, leading up to, salvation—instead of the cursing and perdition appointed for the land that bears only thorns and thistles."⁴

It must be remembered, then, that the writer does not accuse the Hebrew Christians of the apostasy which he here depicts. His words are intended solely as a solemn warning against this very fall which he describes. For it is by this warning that he hopes to strengthen his readers' drooping hands and weary knees.

A STUDY OF THE PASSAGE ITSELF

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have become sharers of the Holy Ghost and have tasted the sweet Gospel of God and the powers of the age to come and have fallen away, since they are crucifying to their own hurt the Son of God and are holding Him up to public shame. For land which has drunk in the rain that frequently falls upon it and bears fruit profitable to those for whose sake it is tilled receives a blessing from God. But should it bring forth thorns and thistles, it is rejected and near a curse, and its fate is fiery destruction.

V. 4, γάρ. The word probably indicates that the writer's reason for neglecting the foundation matters of faith will now be given. 'Αδύνατον, "impossible!" The subject is ἀνακαινίζειν in v. 6. The same word with the same strong emphasis is used by our Lord in Matt. 19:26 and in Mark 10:27. Standing at the beginning of the sentence, the word is singularly impressive. The writer desires to have his readers realize immediately the absolute and irrevocable apostasy he is about to describe. This is the key word of the entire passage. This is the word that creates the problem of interpretation. If its meaning could be legitimately toned down to "difficult," or "relatively impossible," the problem would, to a great extent, disappear. One must translate: "It is *impossible* to renew to repentance those who have once been enlightened, etc."

The question naturally arises: "Does the writer exclude even the power of God to restore repentance in the hearts of those whom he is about to describe?" The answer to this question will depend upon whether or not this passage should be taken as a parallel description of the unpardonable sin as it is presented in Matt. 12:31, 32; Mark 3:22-30; Luke 12:10. For if Heb. 6:4-8 is another picture of the sin against the Spirit, then the sin can never be pardoned. I shall discuss this problem more fully a little later. One point ought to be remembered, however. God's power is unbounded (Matt. 19:26; Mark 10:27; Gen. 18:14; Job 42:2). And, if He so willed, that limitless power could be applied in the case of these apostate Christians. The miracle of rebirth *could* take place again, but whether or not it will depends upon the patience of Him whose power is unbounded.

"Ἄπαξ, "*once*," perhaps in this context, "once for all!" The word, as it is used in the epistle (9:7; 9:26; 9:27f.; 10:2; 12:26f.) seems to mark the completeness, the all-sufficiency, of the action which it modifies. In a remote way, the word might be taken with the following three participles.

Τοὺς φωτισθέντας, "those who have been enlightened." Grammatically, this and the next three participles are the object of ἀνακαινίζειν in v. 6. Westcott feels that this construction is intentional. "The object is placed before the verb in order to fix attention upon the variety and greatness of the gifts which have been received and thrown away."⁵ Does the word as it is used here

refer to the fact of conversion or to the act of Baptism? Probably "those who have been enlightened" and "have fallen away" are the same as those who "sin willfully" after receiving "the knowledge of truth" and for whom there consequently "remaineth no more sacrifice for sins" (10:26). If this is true, then φωτισθέντας would probably refer to the "enlightened," the "converted," rather than to the "baptized."

The word is frequently employed in both the Old and the New Testaments (Is. 60:1; 60:19; Micah 7:8; 1 Cor. 4:5; Eph. 1:18; 3:9; 5:14; 2 Tim. 1:10), and throughout it apparently designates that act of God by which He enlightens men with the revelation of His redemption in Christ. One also is reminded in this connection of 1 John 1:5, where the Apostle tells us that "God is Light." Might we not say, therefore, that to be enlightened is to be filled with God Himself?

He who is enlightened is also enlivened. Compare John 1:4 and Ps. 36:9. The Incarnate Life is also the Light by which men come to see their own guilt, while at the same time they view the glory of a merciful God busily removing that guilt in the torments of His Son's Passion and the triumph of His resurrection. Light and life go together even as darkness and death. Conversion, therefore, is more than the enlightenment of a mind whose thoughts are misdirected toward the devil's dark world of deception and death. Conversion is not merely the setting straight of a misguided mind. Conversion is the resurrection of a corpse.

Another view contends that the word is probably a reference to Christian Baptism. "Die altkirchliche Auslegung bezieht φωτισθέντας (die *Erleuchtung* 6:4; 10:32) seit Justin auf die Taufe."⁶ Justin himself designates Christian enlightenment as a "lustral bath," a term which he directly applies to Baptism (Apology I 61.65). Though it is certainly possible that the writer of Hebrews had in mind the act of Baptism, such does not appear to be the case.

In the first place such an interpretation of the word is rather foreign to its general Scriptural usage. The LXX employs φωτίζω in the sense of "teaching," or "giving instruction" (Judg. 13:8; 2 Kings 12:2). And in the New Testament the baptismal view lacks definite evidence. Keil maintains: "Dieser Sprachgebrauch [to translate φωτίζω for "baptize"] ist dem Neuen Testament

fremd."† Farrar (p. 383) also points out that the baptismal interpretation for φωτισθέντας was not common before its use in the passage before us and is therefore derived from its apparent meaning in Heb. 6:4.

The baptismal view had its serious repercussions in the early church. Both Montanists and Novatians seized upon this passage to justify their position of a demand for excommunication upon those who fell into grievous postbaptismal sins. For was it not "impossible to renew to repentance those who had once been baptized" after they had, perhaps, disavowed Christ in a moment of severe torture, in the pains of persecution?

The use of the aorist in this and the following three participles is significant. It seems to imply a certain definite finality in the events described. Also note the passive voice. This "enlightenment," whether it be conversion or Baptism, is *God's* act. It is in God's light, not his own, that man sees light (Ps. 36:9). There is no self-achievement here, no finding of knowledge by human power or pursuit. He who is "enlightened" is found by the Truth, and therefore should regard himself as one of the privileged poor, the illiterate bankrupts whom the Father has chosen to illumine (Matt. 11:27).

Γευσαμένους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου, "and have tasted of the heavenly gift." To "taste the gift from heaven" is to possess it and to *experience* it in the fullness of its sweet and saving power. Compare 2:9, where Jesus is said to have "tasted death in behalf of everyone." Tasting the heavenly gift, then, involves much more than a passing touch of its blessing. It involves much more than just "catching the crumbs" which happen to "fall from the Master's table," the "leftovers" of His meat of mercy and love. Tasting the gift implies a happy and hearty feast upon that "living Bread which has come down from heaven." Cf. John 6:50-55. This is a keenly conscious tasting of the sweetness of the Lord's grace (1 Peter 2:3).

The correlation of the four participles is not easily determined. Is there co-ordination here or subordination? Are the last three participles to be taken as a further description of the first, or are they introducing new and separate facts of Christian experience? It is difficult to say. The meaning of the passage is not greatly

altered if one adopts any of the three possibilities suggested by Bishop Westcott (p. 147).

"The heavenly gift!" What does it signify? Buechsel in *Kittel* makes the following comment on the word: "In δωρεά liegt im N.T. immer die Gnade Gottes. . . . Es findet sich . . . im N.T. immer von der Gabe, die Gott bzw Christus den Menschen gibt."⁸ If we examine the word in the context of the epistle (5:1; 8:3; 9:9), we discover that it is used to describe the sacrificial gift which the priests of the Lord offered to atone for their own sins and for the sins of the people. Also in 11:4, the word δώροισι seems to be parallel with the word θυσίαν, again indicating the close relationship between δωρεά or δῶρον and θυσία that existed in the writer's mind. Possibly for this reason Bauer proposes "Opfergabe" for δωρεά in 6:4.⁹ Certainly, in the context of the epistle, this "Opfergabe" might be Christ Himself.

If one is inclined to move in the thought world of John, then δωρεά has definite overtones of the Johannine concept of life. Here, too, one recalls that it is Jesus Himself who is God's gift of life to men (John 3:16; 4:10; 6:32f.; 14:6). If it is meant in this sense, then "tasting the heavenly gift" and "being enlightened" would be practically the same experience.

In the Book of Acts the "heavenly gift" is the Holy Ghost (2:23; 8:20; 10:45; 11:17). The whole New Testament consistently asserts that it is the Spirit who gives life. Syllogistically speaking, we could say: "Apart from the Spirit no man can confess Jesus as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3). Therefore apart from the Spirit there is no life, for Jesus is *the* Life." That makes the gift of heavenly life and the Spirit inseparable. The gift is life, the Giver is the Spirit, and, in a sense, the "Father of lights, from whom comes down every good and perfect gift" (James 1:17). Thus, to "taste the heavenly gift" involves a deeply absorbing experience with the Trinity itself. The "heavenly gift" is God Himself in the person of Christ descending upon His sin-ruined creation to effect its re-creation. And it is all a *gift*, "not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8, where God's gift equals salvation).

This gift of God is characterized as being τῆς ἐπουρανίου. According to Bauer (pp. 508, 509), the word has two basic ideas: (1) "That which is found *in* heaven or is realized or takes place

in heaven!" (2) "Things that possess characteristics of heaven, heavenly things!" The latter is the meaning Bauer prefers in the passage before us. He contrasts *ἐπουράνιος* with *ἐπίγεια* in John 3:12. Thus, "heavenly" describes that which is of the Spirit, that which is *ἄνωθεν*, in contradistinction to that which is of the flesh.

If we look at the word in the context of the letter (3:1; 8:5; 9:23), we discover that the author employs it to portray realities that belong to the eternal world, in contrast to that visible creation which is in chained subjection to the change of time and the corruption of death. It is a word that sets forth the things that are of God and therefore imperishable. Therefore that which is *ἐπουράνιος* might also be regarded as *ἀληθινός*. It is genuine; it stands; it endures. It is reality in its fullest sense. He who "tastes the heavenly gift" has become a *δεύτερος ἄνθρωπος ἐξ οὐρανοῦ* (1 Cor. 15:48), a man "begotten from above" and therefore "begotten of the Spirit" (John 3:3-6).

This gift is heavenly because it had its origin with God in heaven, has come down from heaven and mercifully met man's misery with the blessing of endless life, yet its full enjoyment must await the coming consummation in heaven. The use of the genitive is probably partitive. To feast in the fullest sense upon the marriage supper of the Son belongs to another order.

Καὶ μετόχους γενηθέντας πνεύματος ἁγίου, "and have been made partakers of the Holy Ghost!" The word *μέτοχος* is not very common in the New Testament, being found only in Luke 5:7 and in this epistle (1:9; 3:1; 3:14; 12:8). In the Luke passage it seems to be used substantively for "partner" or "comrade." That is also its meaning throughout the LXX. It is a word of dignity, and, as Michel (p. 148) points out: "*μέτοχος* kann sich im Hb. nur mit einer besonderen Würde, mit einer wichtigen Gabe verbinden." "Sharers of the heavenly calling" (1:9), "sharers of Christ" (3:14), "sharers of the Holy Ghost" (6:4) — think of the high privilege involved in such participation! The Christians pictured here had not only tasted well of the Gift, the Bread of Life; they had also been in intimate union with the Giver, the Holy Ghost. Once again we behold a Christianity that is deep and thrilling.

Westcott (p. 148) sees here a rather interesting development in the writer's thought. He proposes that "tasting the heavenly gift" might signify the intimate and individual union of the believer with His Lord. That would be the first aspect of enlightenment. But, through the participation of the Spirit, the believer is also introduced into a wider fellowship than that of his personal faith in Christ. He is placed into the fellowship of the Spirit, the body of Christ, the church. Cf. 1 Cor. 12:12, 13.

Καὶ καλὸν γευσάμενους θεοῦ ῥῆμα, "and have tasted the comforting word of God!" Again one notes the idea of a deeply personal experience as expressed in the verb γεύομαι. It is striking that the verb in this verse is used with the accusative, whereas in v. 4 it is employed with the more usual genitive. In the New Testament the genitive is the more usual case (Luke 14:24; Luke 9:27; John 8:52; Acts 23:14; Heb. 2:9); however, the accusative does occur also in John 2:9.

"Θεοῦ ῥῆμα wird hier als einheitlicher Begriff (ohne Artikel) gebraucht. Der Ausdruck *das gute Wort* (הַדְבָר הַטוֹב) wirkt nicht nur in der LXX (τὸ ῥῆμα τὸ καλόν), sondern auch in den Targumin nach (Str.-B. III 690)." See Michel, p. 148. Bauer (pp. 1226f.) says the word can have one of three meanings. It can refer (1) to the "machtvolle Schöpferwort," the word of God's creative power (Heb. 1:3, 4); (2) to "alle seine Reden" (Luke 7:1); (3) to "words of Christian teaching or heavenly understanding" (John 5:47; John 6:63; John 12:47f.). It is in this last sense that the word seems to be used in the passage before us.

The adjective καλόν has a variety of meanings: (1) good or beautiful with respect to outward appearance (Luke 21:5); (2) good in the sense of being usable; (3) perfect, immaculate. Bauer (p. 665) proposes the third meaning for Heb. 6:5. If that is the case, then the joy of these onetime Christians lay in the fact that they had found God's Word to be the ultimate in every respect. It contained no impurities or imperfections. It was total truth, yet energized total truth! For God's Word is power and light and life. God's Word is fire and thunder and a sword (4:12, 13). God's Word is enacted judgment against men's sin, actualized grace to rescue men from that sin. God's Word is God's kingdom coming, God's will being done. Whether described as

ῥῆμα or λόγος, God's Word is always alive, quick, and powerful, since it is the very extension of Him who never rests.

As was pointed out, *καλὸν θεοῦ ῥῆμα* is the Septuagint translation for *הַדְבָר הַטוֹב*, a phrase which occurs in Joshua 21:45 and Zech. 1:13 to signify the comforting and consoling words that fall from the lips of the Lord as opposed to those of judgment and fire. Thus the divine utterance which is *καλὸν* might be said to come from the Bridegroom God who speaks "over the heart," speaks "comfortably" to the pulsating heart of His trembling Jerusalem, His beloved bride (Is. 40:2). The Word that is *καλὸν* does not come from the "consuming fire" God of Sinai's thunderclouded crest. Rather, it comes from the uplifted countenance of the God who smiles upon us in mercy in the face of Jesus Christ. Not fire, but favor — that is the content of this "good," this "comforting" Word of God. And notice the prominent position of the adjective *καλὸν*, immediately at the beginning of the phrase. Perhaps the writer is thereby attempting to bring out the surpassing sweetness of God's Gospel promises.

People who have "been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, been made sharers of the Holy Ghost, and tasted the good Word of God," must, of necessity, also experience "the powers of the age to come." For anyone who has been reborn "from above," anyone who has risen with Christ from the dark sepulcher of this perishing creation to become a new creature, will experience bolstering foretastes of this happy "age to come" even in the distressing pains of the age that now is. With the conception of Christ the *ἔσχατον* has begun; with the *παρουσία* will come its consummation. And here were these apostate Christians, here are we, living in the great "not yet" between these two events. Yet the facts of Christ's conception, Passion, resurrection, and ascension are in themselves God's unbreakable pledge of that coming consummation in which the present brief and fading foretastes of the "age to come" will give way to complete fulfillment. Then this painful tension between the tragedies we see and experience and the happiness we hope for will forever be resolved. Now our life is "hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). But it is not completely hidden. The wrappings of time cannot entirely hide the happiness to be revealed in us. We are much like children who have seen

our father enter the home with our Christmas present tucked carefully under his arm. We are not quite sure just what it is, but we know it will thrill us with joy the moment we open it on Christmas morn. And the very anticipation sets our hearts throbbing with a kind of impatient excitement. We know the gift is ours, yet we must wait till Christmas until the full revelation and enjoyment. But the joy of Christmas is definitely projected into the pre-Christmas days of waiting and hoping. Even so the "powers of the age to come" project themselves into the pre-Parousia days of the Christian.

The genitive here is probably subjective, for it is this "future age," this "world to come" (2:5) which sends down these powers into the Christian's present problems, pressures, and pains. The word *δύναμις* occurs four other times in the letter (1:3; 2:4; 7:16; 11:11), and in all these instances it seems to be associated with a power that is derived from the all powerful God. In 2:4 these powers are regarded as the Spirit's confirmation of the validity of the Gospel message. The word *αἰών* occurs quite frequently in the epistle (1:8; 5:6; 7:17, 21, 24, 28; 6:20; 13:8), and in the majority of cases it seems to point up that which is eternal in contrast to that which is subject to the change of time and death.

There are some interesting interpretations of the phrase. Goodspeed (p. 60) believes that these "powers" have reference to the miracles which were "everywhere represented as attending the early acceptance of the gospel." The statement by Robinson deserves attention: "Here the writer seems to have in mind the assurance that the Christian has of a continued life with Christ, of a power which can annul death. All the other forms of experience are conditioned in one way or another by the physical, but the faith of one who *knows* Christ and has felt His saving power has passed beyond the bonds of this life and is already linked with the other. In a very real sense, the Beyond is already here for him."¹⁰

To know Christ is to experience Him in an intimate and personal way. It is to be known by Him, to be taken hold of by Him, to be made a "new creature" in His "new creation." In Baptism the Christian has actually been made a sharer in Christ's death, that is, he has once for all passed from the old aeon gov-

erned by that triad of terror — devil, death, and sin — and has been translated into the new aeon of that life both revealed and hidden in the Christ of God. It is Baptism that sets off the tension between the "now" and the "not yet," between "having begun" and "having arrived," in the life of a Christian. Yet, since he is in Christ, all that has happened to the Savior has already happened to him. In Christ *he* has died, *he* has been quickened, *he* has been made to "sit with Christ in heavenly places" (Eph. 2:4-6). Still, the new creature, although wholly redeemed from evil and re-created to God, is in birth pangs with the entire creation until he is freed from "the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:21, 22). In this tension the Christian lives. Yet, to the extent that he is in Christ, he has indeed "tasted the powers of the age to come," and, as Robinson (p. 41) points out, the boundaries of death and time are dissolved in a present tasting of these powers as they "rise up amidst the chaos of the present."

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(To be concluded)

FOOTNOTES

1. Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1908), pp. 17 ff.
2. E. W. Farrar, *The Early Days of Christianity* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., n. d.), I, 381 f.
3. James Moffatt, "A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews," *The International Critical Commentary*, ed. Briggs, Driver, and Plummer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), XXXIX, xxxii.
4. A. B. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899), p. 218.
5. B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), p. 148.
6. Otto Michel, "Der Brief an die Hebräer," *Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament*, ed. Heinrich Meyer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1949), p. 147.
7. Carl F. Keil, *Commentar über den Brief an die Hebräer* (Leipzig: Doerffling und Franke, 1885), p. 154.
8. *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: Verlag von W. Kohlhammer, 1949), I, 674.
9. Walter Bauer, *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, 3d. ed. (Berlin: Verlag Alfred Toepelmann, 1937), p. 348.
10. T. H. Robinson, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," *The Moffatt New Testament Commentary* (New York: Harper Brothers, n. d.), pp. 66, 67.