

The Jewish background Christians reading this letter needed to focus again on Jesus Christ and not forsake Him to rely once again on the forms and teachings of the O.T. that were intended only to point to the Christ. The warning in this passage was a challenge for the reader to examine his or her own heart and to resolve to persevere in their confession of faith in Jesus Christ and not fall away (cf. 6:11–12). They would have keenly aware of the failing of Israel in the wilderness wandering (cf. 2:2; 3:2, 7–19; 4:2, 6, 11; 5:4), and are warned that those who repeat that pattern cannot be renewed to repentance and will perish.

1. Who are those who cannot repent again and hopelessly perish (6:4b–6a)?

a. *The initial picture is rebellious Israel in the wilderness wandering.*

Israel literally had their way “lighted” (Nehemiah 9:12, 19), truly “tasted” the heavenly gift of manna, “partnered” with the Holy Spirit (Exodus 31:2–3; Numbers 11:17, 25; Isaiah 63:11–14; cf. 1 Corinthians 10:1–10), and experienced both God’s good word and power (Exodus 4:28–30; Joshua 23:15). They should have learned spiritual lessons, to depend upon God’s word (Deuteronomy 8:3; cf. Psalm 19:8; 119:105). But they fell away, failing to follow through on their commitment to do all which the LORD spoke (Exodus 19:3; 24:3, 7; cf. 14:31).

b. *But the Jewish background audience could not escape the application to themselves.*

Though the author is convinced of better things concerning them (v.9), there was implied a current possibility of following the same pattern. They should test themselves and need the exhortation to be diligent (vv.11–12). Their situation was not totally foreign from that of Israel in the wilderness. They both had heard good news (4:2) and both had seen and experienced God’s power and Spirit (2:3–4). They had experienced the goodness of God’s word in mutual service (6:10), and at least observed it in the joy in persecution (10:34). BUT they had not fallen away (6:9), though it is obvious from the example of Simon Magus, that it is possible to profess faith in Christ, be baptized, and yet not truly changed in heart (Acts 8:13, 20).

c. *More so and less so this could be descriptive of people today.*

Though the wonders of the Exodus, nor the miracles of the apostles, are repeated today, we have a greater revelation of the Christ than ancient Israel and a more complete written revelation than even the first readers of Hebrews. We also have 2,000 years more history demonstrating God’s working in true believers. Most important, Jesus said that there would be those He never knew who will claim even to have done miracles in His name (Matthew 7:22ff). But the question is not so much about others, but about our own hearts, if we have truly submitted to Christ and are producing the fruit of His Spirit.

2. What is the verdict (6:6b)?

a. It is impossible to renew such people to repentance. The sense is clearly of an impossibility, not a difficulty (cf. 6:18; 10:4; 11:6), to bring about a renewed (not a first) repentance, i.e., of those who already once turned from ‘dead works’ (6:1) to a professed faith in Jesus Christ. They claimed to believe, but had no real heart change.

b. Israel illustrated this at Kadesh-Barnea where they had a change of mind, but no real change of heart. God grants repentance (Acts 11:18) and He can sovereignly choose to limit when He gives it.

3. Why are they so judged (6:6c)?

It is as if they revisit the crucifixion and agree with those who rejected Christ, saying that He is not whom He claimed to be. At the same time they deny the testimony of the Spirit of God to the person of Christ (Matthew 12:22–32). They show a similar contempt of Jesus and disgrace Him in front of others, saying that Jesus isn’t really that great.

4. How should we picture this (6:7–8)?

The agricultural illustration pictures two differing hearts receiving the same revelation about Jesus Christ and experience the goodness of God. One bears spiritual fruit and is an heir of salvation, but the other shows no good change of heart, nothing good is produced over time, and that person is doomed for destruction. There is no loss of salvation pictured, but rather the revealing of a superficial profession of faith.

Better than trying to evaluate the condition of others, we need to evaluate and guard our own hearts. Be sure you have truly confessed Christ as your Lord and Savior. Then cling to Jesus and guard against any hardening of your heart. Pray for and encourage one another. Pray for others and leave the evaluation of their condition to God.

Questions for further thought and discussion:

- To what extent do various people fit the description of vv. 4–5? How do they not?
- Why are people interested in knowing who might have reached the point of it being impossible to repent again? Would God want us to know? Why/why not?
- How would we rightly challenge one another with this picture to examine ourselves to persevere? Should we? Do we? Why/why not? Do you yourself want to be challenged this way?
- What other Biblical pictures or illustrations help us understand this warning? (E.g., Mark 4:1–20; John 15:1–11) What additionally can we learn from them?