

Hebrews 6:4–6, “Standing before Nero”

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[The following material consists of a slightly-edited, two part sermon series. Despite its sermonic genre (some might consider it too “academic” to be a legitimate sermon!), you may find it helpful in grappling with the difficult issues of the warning passages in Hebrews. I have edited out a few of the more obvious oral features, though that might have resulted in some rougher transitions in a few places.]

Hebrews 6 is a fascinating and challenging chapter. The key statements that capsule this section are found in vv. 1 through 6. The kernel of the passage is contained in two phrases, one in v. 1 and the second in v. 3. In order to make sense of what God wants us to learn from these verses we need to know something about the people to whom it was originally written. What was happening in their lives that provoked such a stiff warning? In the message this morning I want to spend most of our time focusing on the events that precipitated the writing of this book. If you don’t understand the situation in which this book was written, you will not likely understand the significance of several very crucial passages in Hebrews. Once we have a good idea of the background, then we will come back and concentrate on the message that God wants us to hear as we read the warnings in this book.

The people to whom the book of Hebrews was written were primarily Christians from a Jewish background. These believers met together in a house in Rome. They were one of many small groups of Christians in that great first-century city. The members of this particular house church in Rome had previously experienced persecution in the years A.D. 49–50. In those years the Roman emperor Claudius had issued an order expelling many Jews from Rome. The reason for his action was a civil disturbance in the city regarding a person named in the Roman historical records as *Chrestus*. Many scholars think that this is a reference to Jesus Christ, or in Greek, *Christos*. If that was the case, then there was probably considerable civil unrest among the Jewish community in Rome as a result of the preaching of the Gospel.

We don’t know whether the Christians who comprised this Roman house church were among those expelled from the city or whether they only suffered the opprobrium that came from association with those expelled. We do know that they had withstood this earlier trial in good faith. Hebrews 10:32 tells us about these experiences of 15 years previous.

At the time the letter that we know by the title *Hebrews* was written, a new situation had developed. It was about 15 years after the persecution under Claudius when this letter was written. Claudius had died in A.D. 54 and Nero had been acclaimed emperor. You may never have heard of Claudius, but I suspect that many of you recognize the name of Nero. During the initial years of his regency the government was run by advisors or guardians because Nero was only 16 years old when he became emperor. The events of these years (A.D. 55–60) were relatively peaceful. The Jews and Christians who had been expelled from Rome were able to return to the city. It was during this time that the apostle Paul wrote his famous letter to the Christians in Rome. Aquilla and Priscilla are names that you will recognize from the book of Acts. They had been among those expelled from Rome by Claudius, but by A.D. 59 (when Paul wrote Romans) they had returned to that city according to Rom. 16:3.

Shortly after that, however, the nature of Nero's reign became evident as he took the reigns of power at the age of 21. It was in A.D. 59—his first year in power—that Nero had his mother murdered—which is somewhat ironic because it was his mother who had arranged to poison the previous emperor, Claudius, so that Nero could become emperor. (Claudius, by the way, was Nero's step-father, which means that Nero's mother had her husband murdered to put her 16-year-old son on the throne.) The commander of Nero's personal body guard died suspiciously in A.D. 62. That same year Nero had his wife Octavia killed so he could marry a different woman. The senator and Roman philosopher Seneca retired from the senate that year and just 3 years later was ordered by Nero to commit suicide. Nero's reputation as a ruthless, murderous emperor is based on these and a great many other similar actions.

In the fifth year of Nero's reign, A.D. 64, the great fire of Rome burned much of the city. You have perhaps heard of Nero fiddling while Rome burned. I don't know if he really played the violin or not, but many residents of Rome believed that Nero was responsible for the fire. Despite all his efforts to squelch the discontent by providing shelter and food, popular opinion did not turn their suspicions away from the emperor. If you had taken an opinion poll in Rome at most any time after the fire and asked what people thought was the cause of the fire, almost everyone would have answered with one word: Nero.

Eventually Nero tried to divert attention away from himself by pointing to others as responsible for the fire. Christians became convenient scapegoats. It soon became quite apparent that Nero was going to unleash a wave of terror on the church. Nero accused the Christians of setting the fire and the imperial police began making arrests. Torture and a

variety of unpleasant deaths followed to provide a public spectacle. A contemporary Roman historian recorded what happened. Here are his own words—a firsthand account written in the first century by Tacitus—a pagan historian:

“All human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class [of people] ... called Christians.... Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who confessed; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of arson, as of hatred of the human race. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of [wild animals], they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames. These served to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open his gardens for the spectacle.... Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man’s cruelty, that they were being destroyed.” (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44.2–8, as cited by Ferguson, 472.)

Such a situation would not have touched the lives of every Christian or every house church immediately. In a metropolitan area the size of Rome there were many small groups of believers scattered across the city. Especially in the confusion that followed the fire it would have taken a considerable period of time for the government to identify and locate most of the house churches. It was during this period of persecution under Nero that both Paul and Peter were executed in Rome.

This setting may also explain why neither the writer nor the readers are identified in the letter that we know as Hebrews. If the letter had come into the wrong hands it would have immediately resulted in a series of arrests. The recipients would have recognized the writer from the clues in the letter even though the author did not include his name, but from our perspective it is impossible to identify him.

We cannot be sure exactly where in this period Hebrews is to be located. This period of persecution continued for 4 years until Nero’s suicide in June of A.D. 68. It was perhaps near the beginning when Nero’s plans were becoming evident but had not yet been fully implemented. The particular house church to which Hebrews was addressed had not yet suffered directly, but they were very fearful of what was to come. Christians in other Roman churches had already been arrested and had suffered martyrdom. As a result,

some people had ceased to identify with the Christians, hoping perhaps to avoid persecution. Others were wrestling with the thought of doing the same.

It was to this fearful, struggling group of believers that the letter of Hebrews was written. It was intended as encouragement and exhortation to hold fast their profession of faith, not to give up, not to go back to their pre-Christian profession just to avoid persecution. Although we do not know the name of the writer, it was probably someone who had served as a pastor of this church at some time in the recent past. For reasons unknown to us he had left Rome. He has received word of the situation in Rome and in particular he has received information about this specific group of believers with whom he had been so closely connected a few years earlier. Since he was unable to travel personally to Rome to encourage them, he writes the letter that has become part of our Bible. It takes the form of a sermon—a written sermon that he intended to be read to this group of believers.

The preacher knew these men and women were frightened. According to ch. 2, they knew the paralysis that comes from the fear of death (2:14–15). In their fear they had considered what they might do in order to avoid calling attention to themselves. In ch. 5 we learn that they had begun to show signs of regression (5:11–14), and in some instances according to ch. 10, they withdrew from the house church altogether (10:25). Publicly acknowledging Jesus Christ as the Son of God might cost them their lives. Withdrawal appeared to be expedient. Since they were Jews by birth, perhaps it would be prudent to identify themselves as Jews for a time and repudiate the Christian label. It was in this setting that the remaining members of the house church gathered to listen to this sermon.¹

This sermon is described in the author's own words in 13:22. He calls it "a word of exhortation." In "response to the sagging faith of frightened men and women at a time when the imperial capital was striving to regain its composure.... It conveys a word from God addressed to the sometimes harsh reality of life as a Christian in an insecure world."²

Our 20th century American world is, in one sense quite different. We do not face official persecution—certainly nothing of the magnitude that these Christians faced under Nero. And yet on another hand, the temptations are quite similar, even if they stem from

¹This paragraph is paraphrased and adapted from Lane, "Hebrews: A Sermon in Search of a Setting," *SWJT* 28 (1985): 17–18.

²*Ibid.*, 18.

a different cause. It seems that many Christians today are responding to the world around them just as these Roman Christians did. Oh yes, they still attend church on Sunday morning (at least when it's convenient), but the rest of the week many professing Christians seek to hide their identification with Jesus Christ. "Surely it would be more prudent to keep that matter quiet at work. To take a stand for Jesus Christ might cost me a promotion—and if I get that new job I will make more money and can take better care of my family. After all, isn't that the Christian thing to do? And of course I can put more money in the offering plate too." And so we rationalize why it is better to live and act like unbelievers all week. Commitment in the face of a hostile world is a scarce commodity these days. In that sense the message of the book of Hebrews is one that we need to hear very clearly.

Notice again the key statements of chapter 6 that we read at the beginning.

These people had started well. They had faced persecution once before and had stood their ground. But now the cost appears to be much greater. Now instead of going on and growing in their faith they have begun to slip away. No longer is their faith vibrant and healthy. They should have been mature enough to be teachers, but instead their former pastor must treat them as new Christians and start all over again in teaching them—milk instead of solid food. His exhortation is focused in verse 1 of chapter 6: *let us go on to maturity*. That is the theme of the entire book of Hebrews. Everything the preacher includes in this written homily is designed to that end: exhorting his friends to go on to maturity rather than turning their back on Jesus Christ and concealing their loyalty to the Savior. That is the positive side of the exhortation.

But there is a negative aspect as well. In verses 4–8 of Hebrews 6 the writer warns the readers of the seriousness of their actions. The descriptions of vv. 4–5 make it clear that the writer is speaking of genuine Christians. To have been enlightened, to have shared in the Holy Spirit, to have tasted of spiritual things can only be true of those who have been saved. But v. 6 speaks of falling away. Many people assume that this means to fall away from salvation, but that is not what the writer is talking about. He argues that those who are real, true believers dare not fall away from their public profession—they dare not try to hide their allegiance to Jesus Christ just to avoid persecution. Prior to the outbreak of Nero's persecution they had faithfully attended the meetings of the church for worship, instruction, and prayer. But now circumstances have scared many into falling away from those commitments.

Notice that the text says that it is impossible to renew such people to repentance. What does it mean that it impossible to do this? This warning cautions against “falling away” because once that line is crossed, God has determined that there can be no restoration—only judgment may be anticipated. This “line” refers to a point at which God imposes a sentence of inevitable and unavoidable judgment due to sin. It may include the “sin unto death” referred to in 1 John 5:16. Such judgment does not result in the loss of salvation. This is judgment of a believer, not condemnation—a subject to which the writer returns in Hebrews 12.

Chastening is a serious matter because, as v. 6 explains, their actions amount to crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. The author of Hebrews explains by this statement that the decisions and actions of the individuals so described constitute a public humiliation of their Savior. He was shamefully treated and endured public mockery and humiliation once. To “fall away” would once again result in public ridicule as pagans mocked these Christians and their Savior as a result of their actions. Our attempts to disguise our Christian commitment do not always fool the watching world. They know our associations and when we are caught being inconsistent, they laugh at both our profession and at our Savior.

Those who are genuine believers face a grave risk if they chose to deny Christ in the face of persecution or opposition. Those who have been given new life and experienced the Spirit’s work in their lives dare not turn back. To do so is to make a mockery of Christ. It holds him up to public ridicule. Some Roman Christians may have stood before Nero’s tribunal and professed that Caesar was lord. They may have chosen to utter a curse on Jesus and offer a pagan sacrifice to avoid martyrdom.

Those who fall away in this way in an attempt to save their own lives may face not only the wrath of Nero’s emissaries, but also the judgment of God for their sin, for this is precisely what such a denial entails. It is not possible for those who deliberately chose this route to be restored to repentance (6:6). Since they have enjoyed God’s blessings, they have an obligation to respond obediently, usefully, and fruitfully—and thus to continue to receive God’s blessing. That is the point of the illustration in vv. 7–8. If, instead, they evidence disobedience, uselessness, and lack of fruitfulness, then they stand in danger of being cursed—the end result of which could be physical death.

Although these are stiff warnings, the writer concludes by expressing his confidence that they will go on. He is confident of better things in their case—things that evidence the reality of their salvation. [cf. 6:9–12] The warning is necessary because the danger of

disgracing Christ is as real as the persecution that looms before them. They have stood the test in previous persecution as they stood together with others who suffered and helped one another. Indeed this had been their pattern up to the present crisis. God knows their record and he will sustain them now as well. The writer's closing exhortation in this section is that each one of them continue to stand true to the end rather than shirking the hard work of standing true to their Savior. That is an exhortation that we ought to heed just as carefully as did those Christians who faced Nero's persecution in the first century.

Does this passage threaten the Christian with the loss of salvation if he falls away? The answer to that question—a question that bothers many Christians—must be *no*. That does not mean, however, that we can or should shrug off these verses. Although they do not hang over our head like Damocles' sword, threatening to sever our relationship with Jesus Christ, they are a serious warning. The warning, however, relates to the potential of judgment if we do not go on to maturity. For those Christians who respond as some of the Romans did by seeking to hide one's association with Jesus, there is a very stern warning of judgment. Eternal life is not just a fire escape from hell, it is a serious commitment that demands our life. Any less will not do.

Part 2

Doubts regarding one's relationship with God are probably experienced by almost every Christian at some point. Some doubts may be healthy from time-to-time as they challenge us to examine our own relationship with God. But some people seem to struggle with this question constantly. These doubts fall somewhere on the spectrum from occasional questions to serious, long-term anxiety regarding the reality of one's salvation.

I can't address every aspect of that question today, but I'd like to consider a few of the passages in the Bible that have perhaps bothered more people than any others in this regard. They are found in the book of Hebrews. There are a series of verses in that book that pose some very serious warnings. They are phrased so strongly that many people have read them and concluded that it is indeed possible for a genuine Christian to forfeit his salvation.

Heb. 2:1–3a; 3:6, 12–14; 4:1–2; 6:4–6; 10:26–31

What should we make of these verses? They do sound rather ominous don't they?

- “We have come to share in Christ *if* we hold firmly to the end...”

- “It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened ... [and] who fall away, to be brought back to repentance...”
- “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire ...”

Could it be that God, who saves us by grace apart from anything good that we do, requires us to do certain things to stay saved? Do these perilous warnings mean that if we do certain things, we will forfeit the gift of eternal life? Must we live a sinless life to make it to heaven? Those are the questions that we need to examine.

Before we do, however, you should know that not all Christians are agreed on how to understand these warning passages in Hebrews. Some believe that it is indeed possible to be genuinely saved and then to lose that salvation because of sin. They read the warning passages in that light and stress the severe language as indicative of just such a situation. We call that answer Arminian theology. You will find it in Wesleyan and Pentecostal circles. Your Christian friends from Nazarene or Methodist churches, or the Assemblies of God, and a variety of charismatic groups. It is even occasionally found in some Bible and Baptist churches, but that is less common in those circles.

Others suggest that these warnings are addressed to the church corporately rather than to individuals. They would thus be very similar to the warnings to the churches addressed in Rev. 2 and 3. Hebrews, however, seems to address individuals, not corporate entities.

Other churches and Bible teachers suggest a third explanation. They study these same texts and conclude that they must be talking about people who profess to be saved, but who were never really born again. They have just tasted spiritual things, but never eaten real spiritual food. Thus when persecution comes, they fall away. Now I am sure that there are people like that, but I don't think that is what the writer of Hebrews has in mind.

To take just Hebrews 6 as an example, I think that we have to stretch the language severely out of shape to make vv. 4 & 5 a description of anything other than genuine salvation. When I read in Hebrews 6:4 about people who have been enlightened, I think we have to understand that they were genuinely saved. *Enlightened* does not mean to shine a light on the outside of a person. It is almost a technical word in the NT for regeneration. The same is true of the word *tasted*. I read explanations that say this means that people taste, but do not really eat. (Kind of like a baby in the high chair—the peas go in and come right back out.) But I have a hard time making that work in Hebrews because the same word is used in Hebrews 2:9—Jesus is said to have died so that he might taste

death for everyone. That absolutely requires that he did not spit it back out! He really died, and if he didn't, we have a major problem. The context of Hebrews 2 is very clear that Jesus ate all of that bitter meal in order to destroy the power of death. So I must conclude that the people in view in the warning passages in Hebrews are genuine believers.

My study of other passages of Scripture, however—passages that are very clear, force me to believe that once a person is genuinely saved they will be preserved by the power of God until they reach heaven. I don't want to take the time to investigate all the details of these other texts, but let me at least read a few of them with you.

John 10:27–29; Romans 8:28–39; 2 Tim. 1:8–12; 1 Peter 1:3–5

In light of such clear statements, and since I am convinced that Scripture does not contradict itself, when I come to Hebrews I must believe that these warnings are addressed to genuine believers who are not threatened with loss of salvation.

Yet they are genuine warnings. Just because we are saved by grace does not mean that we can live as we please. God has established standards of holy living. To deny Christ is a serious matter. We may, as these early Christians were apparently doing, view it as a pragmatic matter of saving one's life. It is perhaps an alias that we adopt even though we don't believe it and fully intend to repudiate it once the danger is past.

For a Christian in the mid-60s at first-century Rome this was a real problem. They faced the prospect of a very unpleasant death if they acknowledged their faith in Jesus Christ. It would seem like the wise thing to do in such cases is to deny Christ and pledge one's allegiance to Caesar—perhaps with your fingers crossed as you said it. After all, isn't the trade off worth it? A little bit of incense offered on a pagan altar would enable you to live longer. And if I live longer, won't I be able to have a longer and more effective ministry?

The writer of Hebrews is addressing that exact situation. His argument is simple. Trust God; go forward in your Christian maturity; don't deny Christ, because to do so will result in God's chastening. If we put our Savior to shame in the public forum, we can anticipate only judgment. In the words of Paul, if we deny him, he will also deny us. Those words, from 2 Timothy 2:12, were written during Paul's last imprisonment just before he was beheaded by Nero, and that at almost the same time as these warnings were written to a group of Jewish Christians in Rome.

Look at each warning passage in this light:

Heb. 2:1–3 = How will we escape God’s chastening if we deny Christ? Hold fast your faith despite persecution. Don’t let it slip. Don’t drift away.

Heb. 3:12–14 = Departing from God = denying Christ, forsaking the assembly of believers. Instead, stand firm *together*. The statement that “we are partakers of Christ *if* we hold on to the end” does not mean that we are (or will be) saved if we persevere, but rather it declares that we share in Christ’s sufferings by being faithful. We share what Jesus experienced at the hands of a hostile world.

Heb. 4:1–2, to “come short of God’s rest” = disobedience and missing God’s blessing. “Rest” in ch. 4 is an analogy with Israel’s entering the Promised Land by obeying God. The first generation failed at Kadesh Barnea and did not enter God’s rest, but the second generation did. They obeyed and received God’s blessing of inheritance of the land. That experience is to be compared with the blessings of obeying God today. It includes standing firm in the face of opposition and even persecution and death.

Heb. 10:26–31 describes judgment or chastening on God’s people for “sinning willfully.” How? According to v. 25, sinning willfully refers to forsaking the assembly of the believers. It does not mean missing a church service now and then but is rather denying Christ and refusing to have anything to do with God’s people in an attempt to avoid persecution.

Disobedience to God’s law in the OT brought judgment—even physical death. It is even more true today for those of us who know more of God’s truth and have seen the fulfillment of God’s promises in the crosswork of Jesus Christ. Verse 29 refers to those who trample the Son of God underfoot by denying him. Such people deserve very severe punishment. Remember v. 30, God will judge *his people*; and v. 31, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. The pastor who wrote this letter reminds his former flock that they have been through persecution once before. God preserved you then; he will do the same again today.

None of these passages threaten Christians with the loss of salvation, but they do exhort and warn us of the seriousness of what we profess—and of the consequences of not obeying him.