

Persevering and Falling Away
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
July 1, 2018 – PM Sermon
Rev. Peter Jonker
Hebrews 5:11 – 6:12

This is a scary bit of Scripture. Hebrews 6:4-8 has long been recognized as one of the most difficult texts in the whole New Testament. *“It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the coming age, to be brought back to faith if they fall away.”* It is impossible. The preacher of Hebrews seems to be saying, if a person who lives as a Christian for a while, if he participates in the life of the church, if he prays and sings, if he tastes the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but later turns around and leaves it all, and gives it up, it is impossible for that person to be brought to repentance. The door of the kingdom is slammed shut and they are denied entrance.

That’s frightening. It’s frightening because it seems to make our salvation a tenuous thing. These words seem to say that not only can we lose our faith, but we can lose it in such a way as to close down the possibility of repentance. One little fall, one little slip and we could be on the permanent outs with God. This seems to go against what we learned as children. We were taught that it is impossible for a Christian to lose her salvation. That’s the Perseverance of the Saints that we read earlier from the Canons of Dort. The canons say that “the sealing of the Holy Spirit can neither be invalidated nor wiped out.” We are used to thinking of our salvation as an unsinkable ship. But we read these verses and suddenly our salvation seems more like a leaky canoe in a windstorm. One false move and we could be in the drink. And more to the point, these are terrible words because as we read them, we can summon up the names and the faces of many people we know personally who fit this description. People we grew up with. People in our family. Our friends. Our children. We all know someone who went to Christian school with us, who used to come to our church, but who for one reason or another, turned their back on faith. The idea that the door is irrevocably closed for these people is more than we can bear.

What do we make of these pointed, frightening words? This morning I want to help us get beyond the fear inspired by this passage. I don’t think this passage is meant to frighten us. It’s meant to encourage us. I want us to take these hard words seriously, but I also want the gospel to come through. And in my attempts to explain what the preacher is trying to tell us, I’m going to say three things about this text. The first thing I think we need to say about Hebrews 6 is that we need to take these warnings seriously. It is very clear here and throughout the book that the Preacher of Hebrews is deeply concerned about complacency. He is concerned about Christians making faith too easy. He is concerned with people treating their Christian faith like it’s a weekly trip to the spa instead of a rigorous daily discipline. He’s deeply concerned with people who treat their church like a comfortable social club rather than a community of service and personal transformation. For the preacher Christianity is about dedication and passion and running with perseverance the race marked out for us. People who treat faith like it is a safe social club, people who are complacent, are in real danger, says the preacher. They are in peril. They are not OK. They are not fine. They need to wake up. And the preacher is so concerned about complacency that he issues some pretty stern warnings to the church. He does that here in our passage and throughout the book of Hebrews. Warnings against complacency are a major theme of this book. In Hebrews 2 he says be careful that you do not drift away! Jesus’ salvation

is a wonderful gift, *“How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?!”* In Hebrews 4 the preacher tells us to remember what happened to Israel in the desert when they disobeyed they were punished, so *“Let us make every effort to enter our Sabbath rest so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.”* And then in chapter 10 he says, *“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!”* These are serious warnings. These are serious words.

I admit that I don't generally don't preach like this preacher. I'm not a fire and brimstone guy. No announcements of judgment and raging fire. No “sinners in the hands of an angry God” It's more like “sinners in the hands of a loving God. “And that's a good thing mostly. The gospel is not a threat. The bottom line of the gospel is not, smarten up or you're going to be in trouble. The bottom line of the gospel is God loves you, and Jesus died for you. But once in a while, when the situation calls for it, it is appropriate and necessary to speak words of warning.

William Willimon tells a story about a time when he was a pastor in Georgia and he went to a funeral at another church. A relative of one of his parishioners died and he went to the funeral in a small rural Baptist church. It was a hot sweaty summer day, and the church was jammed with mourners all waiting to hear a word from the pastor. “I have never seen anything like it!” said Willimon. They wheeled the casket in; the preacher began to preach. He shouted. He fumed. He waved his arms. “It's too late for Joe!” the preacher growled. *“He might have wanted to do this or that in life, but it's too late for him now. He's dead. It's all over for him. He might have wanted to straighten his life out, but he can't now, he's done! ”But it ain't too late for you!! People drop dead every day. So why wait? Now is the day for decision. Now is the time to make your life count for something. Give your life to Jesus!”* It was the worst thing I'd ever heard!” writes Willimon. And on the way home he fumed to his wife that this was the most insensitive, most manipulative, most cheap and inappropriate funeral sermon he had ever heard. His wife listened patiently to his ranting. She agreed. It was tacky, manipulative and inappropriate. “Of course,” she added, *“The worst part of all is that what he said was true.”*

You will never hear a funeral sermon like that at LaGrave. And certainly the timing of this minister's words was inappropriate. And maybe also the tone of his words was inappropriate, *but the message he brought that hot day in that Georgia church is true.* It is a biblical message. The center of the Bible's message there is a word of love and joy and hope, but at every point in the Bible there is also warning to us of the results of disobedience and complacency. The warnings occur at every stage in the salvation story. They're in the law and the prophets, they're in the stories of Abraham and Moses and David, and they're in the teachings of Jesus and the letters of Paul. They're in Acts and Revelation. The grace poured out on us in Jesus Christ calls from us a life of complete dedication and grateful commitment. Complacency is going to get us in trouble. That's the warning of this text, that's the warning of the Bible and it's a warning we need to hear.

But while we need to take the warning seriously, we must also realize that the preacher is not trying to frighten us. That's not his main purpose in the passage. His main purpose is to encourage us to grow. That's the second point I want to make when it comes to making sense of this passage. The preacher wants to motivate us to grow. You've got to look at the passage in the overall movement of Hebrews to get a sense of that. The preacher has been preaching to his congregation about Jesus, telling them how he is a greater prophet than Moses. Telling them how he is a greater High priest than the other priests in the world, telling them how wonderful, Jesus is. And up to now things have been moving along fairly well in his sermon, but now he knows

that he's about to come to a really hard section. He's about to get into some heavy theology. He's about to enter some deep waters. He's about to talk about how Jesus is a priest in the order of Melchizedek, which is not easy for any of us to understand. And like a clever teacher, the preacher does something in his sermon to prepare them for the hard stuff. He uses a little reverse psychology on them. He stops and he says, "*Well, at this point we should be talking about the deep things of the faith, we should be moving on to more mature food, but I'm not sure you're ready for it. You aren't mature enough for what I'm about to get into. I'm not sure you can handle it. I'm not sure you've got the will and the dedication it takes.*" Do you see what he's doing? You can almost imagine the congregation sitting up at this point and saying, "*What do you mean we can't handle this! What do you mean we aren't dedicated enough! Bring it on! We can handle it. Tell us about Melchizedek! Tell us about the role of blood in atonement! We're ready!!*" This whole passage, with its warning and its questions about their level of maturity, is the work of a clever teacher. He's trying to inspire them to new levels of attention and effort. He doesn't want the hearers to start worrying about the eternal status of their children and their friends, he doesn't want them to get anxious about their own salvation, and he's trying to encourage them to grow. These dire warnings are a kind of rhetorical device.

The third thing I want to say about this passage directly addresses the hard words of verses 4-6. Yes we can acknowledge that the passage isn't meant to frighten us. Yes we can say that the preacher doesn't intend to make us worry about the salvation and fate of our lapsed friends, but still there are those words about the impossibility of repentance for those who have fallen away. What can we say about that?

Well, given all that's been written about these three verses, there are many things I could say but let me simply say this. When the preacher says it is impossible for these people to repent he may just be talking about the reality he has observed as a pastor; he may be speaking from his experience of working with people. Because isn't it true that the hardest people to reach with the gospel, the hardest people to touch are the people who grew up in the church, who heard all the stories and know all the songs, but who have been hurt or turned off by something and have now turned away? Isn't it true that sometimes a person who knows nothing about Jesus will be more open to hearing about him, while a person who considers herself burned by the church will put up walls as soon as you mention his name? For those of you who have someone you love who is estranged from the church, isn't it true that sometimes you hardly dare bring up the subject? This passage recognizes a real life reality. It is very hard, depressingly hard to bring an ex-church person back around. It seems impossible!

Which brings us back to that scary word: *impossible*. It reminds us that that when we say impossible we have to ask 'impossible for whom?' Vern Bengtson was a man who grew up heavily church. His father was a pastor in the Evangelical Covenant church. He was baptized and he grew up with the church at the center of his life. In the words of 6:1 he had tasted the heavenly gift, he had been fed by the word of God. But then in 1963 as a graduate student at the University of Chicago he threw it all away. He gave up belief and entered into a career as a successful sociologist of religion. He studied faith, but he had none. He was precisely the kind of person about which Hebrews 6 seems to say, IMPOSSIBLE. Then on Easter morning, Bengtson woke up and decided wander into a Gothic-looking church in Santa Barbara California. Here's how he describes what happened. "*The organ was roaring, the congregation was singing, the pillars were going up to heaven, the light was sifting down through the stained-glass windows,*" "*I was just overwhelmed. I found my way to a pew and started crying. ... I haven't been the same since.*" "In a burst of emotion and light, the Lord brought Vern Bengtson home.

When we say ‘impossible,’ whose impossibility are we talking about? When the preacher of Hebrews says ‘impossible,’ whose impossibility is he talking about? Remember Matthew 19:26. In Matthew 19:26, the disciples are discouraged when rich young man walked away from faith. The rich young man rejects Jesus, and Jesus says, “It’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven!” The disciples say, “who then can be saved?” And Jesus says: “With man this is impossible, but not with God. With God all things are possible.” For those of you who can’t read verses 4-6 without seeing the face of someone you love and feeling pain, let these words be your hope and comfort: “All things are possible with God.”

© Rev. Peter Jonker