

THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST, PART 12: APOSTASY

Hebrews 6:4-20 (NASB)

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This is the true story of two Christian families from Minnesota named Smith and Jones whose names have been changed to protect them. The Smith and Jones families arrived in their little town several years apart. They had both come to accept job opportunities in the local food processing plant which produced bulk corn and soy products. The Smiths and Joneses first met at church. Their church was a solid, reasonably-healthy Bible-teaching church of about 180 people. It was not overwhelmingly effective at reaching the community for Christ, but people came to know the Lord by ones and twos over time.

The church went through a pastoral transition and called a youngish man who had some interesting new ideas about how to reach out. The congregation thought it might be time for some new things since they wanted to do better at reaching the community. To make a long story short, under the new pastor the church went through a rapid and wrenching process of change into a seeker-driven church. As people began flooding into the services, the pastor built a growing staff. The church became staff-driven as well. The Smiths and Joneses went along at first, but they began to notice that their input was desired less and less as time went by.

The main service was no longer for Christian believers, but for seekers. The Sunday school no longer offered regular Bible instruction, but became filled with classes on felt needs, such as how to have a happy marriage, overcoming depression, and men's and women's issues. Books from many authors were the primary texts used to teach these classes. The Smiths and Joneses took comfort that their home Bible studies were still studying the Bible. But eventually, the pastoral staff insisted that even the home groups were for fellowship and networking, and asked the leaders to change formats. Entertainment seemed to have become the one thing that defined every meeting of the church, and it worked like a charm. The original church of under two hundred grew into a megachurch.

That was the breaking point for these two Christian families. They both went looking for some way to return to a Bible-based form of church, and with few options in their small community they both opted for house churches which were becoming full of refugees from the megachurch which seemed not to miss them at all. At first, the sheer freedom of the separate small groups where the Smiths and Joneses had landed was exhilarating. They were strongly encouraged as they studied the word of God week by week.

This is where the stories of the Smiths and Joneses diverged. The group leader for the Smith family began to teach on Jewish topics very often. The Smiths became uneasy at some of the interpretations he was offering, but they felt better after talking them over with him. Then a contingent of believers arrived through some community contacts. These new members of the group, though Gentiles by birth, insisted that the Jewish practices of the Old Testament were supposed to be practiced by all Christians. They were adamant that the early church had fallen into error almost immediately because of the influx of Gentiles who had perverted the true way for the church. The Smiths were taken aback, to say the least, but they participated in the Jewish festivals and feast days along with their group

since they did not know what else to do.

The group leader for the Joneses was in no danger of falling into that trap. He had seized upon the concept of grace as the thought which guided the interpretation of every part of the Bible, although he seemed to have a different definition for grace than the one they knew. The Joneses were concerned when he began to teach that no obedience of any kind is necessary for salvation. In fact, he said, any attempt to obey God as part of receiving Christ dishonors him. We are living in the dispensation of grace, not of law, he said repeatedly. The Jones family felt that this was not exactly right, but at least they were studying the Bible in their group. All attempts to get their teacher to talk more about the value of Christian obedience failed, and since the group was thriving he had little motive to change.

Because the story of the Smith and Jones families is still being written, their destinies in Christ are still being determined. But their groups are dallying in a most dangerous fashion with what would have to be called apostasy, which means falling away from Christ. But wait, you say, how can such serious-minded, good people be close to apostasy? Wouldn't that mean that some folks like us may be in danger of departing from Christ, even while studying the Bible?

CHRIST SUPREME OVER THE DEFINITION OF APOSTASY

One of the great burdens of the book of Hebrews is to answer that question for a group of good Jewish people who were sitting on the fence about the supremacy of Christ, whom they would have called *Yeshua Hamashiach*. The good news of Christ had come to them, many of them had received it, yet the immense gravitational pull of their familiar Judaism threatened to pull Christ out of his position of supremacy in their lives. The writer to the Hebrews wrote these strong words to combat this tendency to drift back into the old Judaism: **"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). Though some have argued to the contrary, this is a list of attributes of genuine Christians, beginning with the *sine qua non* of repentance with a view to the crucifixion of Christ. The point of the passage is that no matter the destination of one's departure from Christ, no matter whether one drifts away or runs away, abandoning the supreme sacrifice of Christ for sins leaves one with no hope, no atonement, and no future. Worse than that, such departure openly shames Christ who deserves nothing but love and honor.

Although the predominant theological systems of the West have locked in mortal combat over these words we are well able to understand what Christ is saying to us in this passage about his supremacy over the definition of apostasy. He is saying that apostasy inevitably leads to eternal destruction, as the next two verses plainly state: **"For ground that drinks the rain which often falls on it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned"** (Hebrews 6:7-8).

Some interpreters would like to say that since this is an individual with the marks of regeneration he or she must be redeemed, and therefore the "burning" must be merely the loss of heavenly rewards for an otherwise genuine Christian (cf. *Chosen But Free*, Norman Geisler). But the next verse does not

allow us to take that view: "**But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way**" (Hebrews 6:9). Since the writer is about to list the "better things" which do accompany salvation, then the things he just mentioned do not accompany salvation. If a person abandons his repentance, repudiates the central sacrifice of Christ, and produces bad spiritual fruit ("**thorns and thistles**") we may safely say that he or she has no valid claim of redemption.

It is clear that no one is made a "partaker of the Holy Spirit" who is not regenerate, as Paul wrote in Romans 8:9: "**But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.**" For this reason some interpreters argue that this is a person who was once eternally saved, fully in the body of Christ, and has lost that position. It is hard to understand how something eternal can work out to be temporary. If salvation is not eternal it is not salvation! The terms in this passage are difficult for all theological views.

I do not say that the foregoing debate is not fruitful, but it is a distraction from the main burden of the passage which is the reality and consequences of apostasy. This passage is, in fact, a masterful pastoral presentation to a church full of people who were all in different places spiritually, and that accounts for its manner of expression on this vital subject. A great temptation for many of the Hebrew Christians in Rome was to depreciate the supreme sacrifice of Christ in favor of a return to the teachings and practices of traditional Judaism. Christ wanted them to know that no matter how familiar and comfortable this would seem to them, any movement away from his once-for-all atonement for sins on the cross was a movement into spiritual death. That is what the passage means when it says that for such a person repentance is impossible. So long as the cross is understood and rejected there is no hope. That is the definition of apostasy.

On the other hand, as long a person is breathing, there is possibility of genuine repentance, even from the condition of apostasy. A return to the belief in the supreme sacrifice of Christ for sins opens the door of repentance once again, as the Lord himself said: "**All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out**" (John 6:37).

Now we see why the two house churches I described in my opening story were in danger of apostasy. Once faith in some principle other than the cross takes precedence, apostasy has occurred. There are many Jewish believers in Yeshua Hamashiach who celebrate the Jewish holidays and faithfully maintain the supremacy of Christ and his cross. But you should know that there is a small but vocal movement afoot in the church today to assert that everything Jewish is superior to everything Gentile, in some cases eclipsing the cross. These neo-Hebraists are busy reinterpreting the New Testament on the theory that all of the Old Covenant practices were supposed to have been retained and that the Gentiles sinfully excluded them in the early church. This leads to the assertion from the neo-Hebraists that they are the only ones who know the proper way to conduct a church.

The danger faced by the other house church was converting saving grace founded upon the cross into absolute acceptance by God for all people regardless of repentance. Many churches today advertise that they are presenting a "new way to do church," and are meeting with great success in attracting attenders. Some of these churches are sound but some have simply stopped telling people that they are sinners who need a Savior who died for them on the cross. From them also comes the assertion that they are the only ones who know how to "do church" the right way. The supremacy of Christ means that he

alone says how to do church the right way and what constitutes apostasy.

CHRIST DEFINES THE THINGS THAT ACCOMPANY SALVATION

The Lord, through the writer to the Hebrews, then moves from this frightening warning to some words of encouragement so that we may know what the things are which accompany salvation: "**But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way. For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises**" (Hebrews 6:9-12).

In short, the writer says: "Don't worry! If you believe in the supreme sacrifice of Christ you are not in danger of slipping out." The key thought is that through diligence or earnestness the believer can move into the comfort of "**full assurance of hope until the end.**" The writer gives a list of specifics one expects to see in the truly redeemed. But before we list the specifics, it is crucial that we see the enduring nature of all of these attributes of the faithful. These are things which a genuine Christian pursues to the end of life or the return of Christ, whichever comes first. This is a loving pastoral plea to avoid slipping away and to hold on with all our might to the sufficiency and supremacy of Christ, and not to permit even very attractive and powerful things to pull us away.

The first thing real Christians are said to pursue is ministry, which means service. Doing things for the good of others in the name of the Lord is a crucial identifying mark of the truly saved, and passiveness toward the needs of others is a mark of death. The writer also tells us that love for others is an identifiable mark of believers since it is the very nature of God.

This pastor urges us to "**show diligence**" to stick it out to the end. You have to care about your salvation, and whether you care about it will be revealed by your diligence or lack of it. If you do not work at it, no one can do it for you. I am reminded that C. S. Lewis, after being converted as an adult, faithfully attended Headington Parish, a local body of the Church of England. Why did he do that? He was not expecting revelations in the sermon, or ecstatic experiences. He was acting out a set of faith convictions that Christians must be faithful to the real church, consisting of flesh and blood redeemed people. Real Christians must be diligent in attendance at worship because we were made to worship and it is the express will of the Lord.

The writer to the Hebrews, on behalf of the Lord, pleads with us to overcome sluggishness and pursue our inheritance of the promises of God by faith and patience. Faith is not only the vital act of entrusting ourselves to the Lord, but holding onto "**the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints**" (Jude 3). Trusting the Lord for life means we actively resist the intrusion of every seductive thing which draws us away from Christ. And patience requires perseverance. Sticking to the faith will not be easy when it does not seem that our prayers are being answered. Our emotions of love for God may flee away for a time and we may find ourselves being diligent without joy. If you are feeling that way the Lord says to you: "Don't give up! You must hang on!"

It is the trustworthiness of the Lord himself which gives us the courage to go on, so that "**...we**

who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us" (Hebrews 6:18b). The Lord does not lie or change his mind, so our faith in him will not be disappointed.

We have not yet answered the question of how a person who seems to have the marks of regeneration could finally fall away from Christ. I would suggest to you that this passage, by its constant urging to diligence in faith to the end, is telling us that the words "eternally saved" are written on a human life based upon all the evidence of that life. The data of our lives as to whether we persevered in Christ or not will not be complete until it is over. God knows the entire data set, since he knows the end from the beginning, but it is he who sovereignly upholds the significance and responsibility of our human decisions. I conclude that no Christian is finished **"taking refuge"** in the Lord until the end, neither has he or she finished taking **"hold of the hope set before us"** until his or her earthly life has come to an end. And both traditional Calvinists and Arminians agree that persevering to the end is an indispensable mark of true Christians, though they differ as to why.

So we must never let down our guard against the danger of apostasy. As we have seen, some forms of falling away from Christ are very religious and make much use of the Bible. Others are more exotic, telegraphing the fact of apostasy more obviously. Both the Smith and the Jones families had valid concerns about where their megachurch was heading as it gradually withdrew Bible teaching as a central activity. Their search for truth and true Christian worship was valid as well. It is also possible that the house church format could be the best place for them to fellowship.

But strangely, both families ended up in small groups which were committing the same error as the megachurch they had left. They were giving too much credence to their own feelings as a judge of what was true and false. The group which felt an interest in Judaism was on the verge of embracing legalism instead of the centrality of the supreme sacrifice of Christ. The other group's feelings were leading them to exchange redeeming grace for the counterfeit of unconditional acceptance. Fortunately, their story is still being written, and as long as they yet live they have the opportunity **"to realize the full assurance of hope until the end."** That is true of the megachurch which they left as well. Jesus doesn't write anyone off and neither should we.

If you can read or hear this message, your story is not yet done being written either. What is the status of your faith and perseverance in the Lord? Are you hanging on, or have you sold out to something which is easier and makes you feel better for the moment? Anything which supersedes the supremacy of Christ and his cross in your faith is taking you away from eternal life.

That was the burden of the writer to the Hebrews, through whom the Lord encourages us: "Don't give up! Hang on, even when you can't see how it will work out!" For that is the nature of genuine faith. And speak the truth to your lapsed, post-Christian family members and friends. If they are not taking refuge in Christ as their only hope, they need to hear from you that their eternal lives are hanging in the balance. The words will probably sound harsh to them, but it only makes sense that if Christ is supreme over all things, then his provision for salvation is indeed the only way.

And tend the fire of your own hope! If you find yourself running low try a new devotional book, go on a retreat or conference, try a new class at church, work on a new Bible study method or approach to prayer. Above all, seek the Lord! That is the path to the **"full assurance of hope until the end."**