

Dear Phil

CAN BACKSLIDERS EVER BE RENEWED?

I am studying Hebrews 6:4–6, and I’m stuck. It sounds as if it is saying that a person who is saved and then backslides can never be “renewed” again. Could you shed some light on it for me? —Tom

Dear Tom,

You’re right. That is precisely what the passage sounds like, especially in the King James Version. There are three issues involved in answering your question: first, the wording of the passage; second, the spiritual condition of those about whom the author is writing; and third, the meaning of “it is impossible to renew them to repentance.”

Let’s start with the wording of the passage. There are no substantive differences among the Greek manuscripts of this passage, so the real issue is what is the best way to translate the text. The King James Version reads, “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, *if they shall fall away*, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.”

I have italicized the phrase “if they shall fall away” because it is a problem with the KJV’s translation (as well as with the NIV and NKJV). There is no “if” in the

Greek. The text should read “and have fallen away” as in the NASB, ESV, HCSB, and TNIV. The writer is dealing with people who “were enlightened and have tasted... and were made partakers... and have tasted... and have fallen away...” In other words, the phrase “and have fallen away” is the fifth in a series of descriptive statements about the kind of persons the writer is talking about.

The second issue in this passage is the spiritual condition of those who “have fallen away.” Typically Calvinists and Neo-Calvinists deny that they were truly saved (although there are some exceptions to this rule). On the other hand, Arminians characteristically affirm that they were truly saved. The deciding factor for me is the author’s use of the verb “having been enlightened.” In Heb. 10:32, the author uses the exact same verb in the same tense and voice: “But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings”

There is no question whether “after being enlightened” in 10:32 refers to being saved. On this

basis then I conclude that those in 6:4 who were enlightened were saved as well. In addition to this evidence, the language of having been made partakers of the Holy Spirit is difficult to apply meaningfully to the unsaved.

The third issue is with the last phrase of the passage. It reads, “seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.” The verbs “crucify” and “put to an open shame” are present tense participles. That means that they are describing action that is in progress at the same time as the main verb in the sentence. The main verb is the “is,” the third word in verse 4. Although this is a little clumsy, we can make the verse’s wording clear by translating it this way, “It is impossible... to renew [such people] again unto repentance *while* they are crucifying to themselves the Son of God afresh, and are putting him to an open shame.” The writer’s point is that anyone who is in the process of crucifying Jesus afresh and shaming him openly cannot be renewed to repentance because they are sinning. One cannot be sinning and repenting simultaneously. The person who is bent on sinning is also bent on not repenting.

To sum up, the Hebrew writer is warning genuine Christians that those who fall away and persist in sinning, which is in essence crucifying Christ again and openly shaming the one who died to save them *from* their sins, cannot be forgiven, for there is no forgiveness without repentance. However, if they truly repent and stop their sinning, they can be renewed again.

Sincerely,
Philip

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