Hebrews 6:1-8 Bible Study and Discussion Questions

Hebrews 6:1-8

I. Summary of the foundational principles (1-3)

II. Warning against apostasy (4-8)

I. Verses 1-3

Discussion Questions

What is the connection between this passage and the last passage?

Does he review the elementary teachings? Does the writer lay again this foundation?

What are some of the foundational principles of the gospel that are mentioned in verses 2-4?

What do you think the author meant by “dead works?”

What does the washings and laying on of hands refer to?

Cross-references

Matthew 23:25-28 – The Pharisees appeared clean on the outsides, but were full of sin on the inside.

On maturity:

1 Corinthians 14:20

Ephesians 4:13-15

Teaching Points

In the last passage in chapter five, the writer is encouraging his readers to wake up from their spiritual lethargy. They need to start paying attention, start obeying, and start passing on the things they have learned. Here is yet another encouragement for them to move forward, to press on for maturity. No matter what spiritual level we are at, either a newborn Christian, or a believer for decades, we must always be pushing on for a closer relationship with Christ. Do not be satisfied with your current spiritual level or allow yourselves to become complacent. Perhaps last year you read through the whole Bible, last week memorized a chapter, or today have already shared the gospel with 5 people. Still, do not rest in last accomplishment. Be quick to forget the successes of the past so that you don’t get stuck reliving them over and over.

Elementary teaching/foundation – The readers have been exposed to the core principles of the gospel many times, especially some principles from the Old Testament. The writer doesn’t want them to get stuck on those same points and never move forward. When will a teacher review a lesson? When will a parent repeat an instruction? When the student/child doesn’t do what they were supposed to. When growing up, there were several instructions my father repeated many times. One was to turn out the
electricity when we left a room. I probably heard that several hundred times growing up. Why? Every time I heard it because one of us had “forgotten” and not done it. He had to keep reviewing the “elementary” teaching because we weren’t listening/obeying. In verses 1b-2, the writer briefly summarizes some of those basic teachings they should have mastered by now. These include:

Repentance from dead works – This could include empty religious rituals which had become commonplace in New Testament times. The Pharisees had compiled instruction books with thousands of rules governing every area of life. There were rules on keeping the Sabbath, rules on giving, rules on vowing, and basically everything else. As we see in Matthew 23:25-28, they looked very respectable on the outside. They took great care to be honored by people. What are some things they did in the gospels to obtain honor? They stopped combing and washing their hair when fasting so that others would see them. They tried to sit at the place of honor at banquets. They showed others how much they gave. They prayed loudly on street corners to get attention. And so on. These could be some of the dead works which are referenced here. In general dead works, would include anything good we do with ulterior motives or anything good we do to try to earn salvation by ourselves.

Faith toward God – In fact, as we have learned in James, faith toward God is proven to be genuine faith if it is accompanied by works. These are not the dead works just discussed but a natural outpouring of our love and appreciation for what God has done for us (Eph 2:10).

Washings and laying on of hands – This could refer to the Old Testament Levitical rules for washing (Leviticus 16:4, 24,26,28). Laying on of hands may refer to a person who made a sacrifice. He would lay his hands on the animal being sacrificed to symbolically pass his sin to the animal (Leviticus 1:4, 3:8, 13, 16:21). In the New Testament washing could be the spiritual regeneration in the heart of the believer (Titus 3:5). Laying on of hands could be for prayer or to receive the Holy Spirit. Because these were topics that had recently been covered with this group, it is hard for us to tell whether it is a reference to the Old or New Testament.

Resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment (these two are linked)– In Acts 23:8 we see that the Pharisees believed this. This teaching comes from the Old Testament in Daniel 12:1-2.

There are two possible ways to interpret this passage in Hebrews 6. One is that they were already believers having heard and believed these elementary principles. But they were not growing. The other is that they believed all of these things like most Jews did, but were not saved yet because they didn’t embrace Christ. A good pharisee would actually believe all that we saw in verse 1b-2. But he wouldn’t be saved because he rejected Christ. It is possible that this group of Hebrews or at least some of them were in a similar boat. They believe in the Old Testament, but they have yet to fully embrace Christ (which is why the author would spend a lot of time on the superiority of Christ and warnings about apostasy). Most likely there were both real believers in the group/church as well as some who were on the fence who didn’t fully commit themselves to Jesus yet.

II. Verses 4-8

Discussion Questions

What kind of case is referred to in verses 4-6?

Could it be referring to someone losing their salvation? Why or why not?
If it doesn’t refer to someone losing their salvation, how to explain their “enlightenment,” “tasting,” and “partaking of the Holy Spirit?”

Keeping in mind one of the repeated themes throughout Hebrews, what do you think is the big picture warning here?

Taking a step back from the doctrinal discussions, what practical impact should this verse have on us?

What does it mean that these people “crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame?”

What is the point of verses 7-8? In this mini-parable, who does the ground refer to? Who does “for whose sake it is tilled” refer to? Can you think of any similar wording anywhere else in the Bible?

**Cross-References**

Assurances of salvation –

John 5:24

1 John 5:13

John 10:28-30

Ephesians 2:8-9

Romans 8:28-30

John 1:9- The true light which comes into the world enlightens every man.

Hebrews 2:4 – Many recipients of blessing during Jesus’ ministry (and later during the apostles’ ministry) partook of the Spirit in some way.

John 15:6 – The one who doesn’t bear fruit will be gathered up and burnt.

Matthew 3:10, 7:19 – The fruitless tree will be cut down and destroyed.

**Teaching Points**

Verses 4-6 are controversial. Some who believe that you can lose your salvation use these verses as their cornerstone. What do you think they mean? A rule of biblical interpretation is that when you are confused, interpret the less clear passages by the more clear biblical passages. Using this rule of interpretation we can rule out loss of salvation as a meaning of these verses. See cross-references. There are simply too many clear verses in the Bible that teach us the security of salvation. There are many more places that show us salvation is given to us by God and not something we deserve. If we did not earn it then we cannot lose it. If we didn’t deserve it when first saved, we will not lose it because we don’t deserve it after becoming saved. Therefore these verses must have a different meaning.
If it doesn’t refer to a person losing their salvation then it must refer to people who weren’t really saved to begin with. These would be people who go to church, people who understand the gospel, people who are exposed to the teachings of the Bible, people who fellowship with other believers, and people who because they are surrounded by other believers share many of the same experiences and blessings as those true believers around them. In the Old Testament, the Jews were God’s chosen people. There are numerous instances of God’s miracles and blessings on their behalf. If you were a Jew, there would be many times when you would have experienced the grace of God in your life. Does that mean you were a true believer? Nope. Just look at Hebrews 2 and the wilderness years for an example. Those Jews saw MANY of God’s miracles. These miracles delivered them from slavery and from foreign armies. These miracles fed them, clothed them, healed them, and quenched their thirst. But the majority of them finally rejected God. This is a similar case. If you have been a believer for a length of time you can probably think of many people in this category. Sadly, I can remember many people who came to fellowship/church, who went out sharing the gospel with us, who joined our Christian retreats, who joined our fellowship meals, etc. who finally chose that the Christian life wasn’t the life for them. They turned their back on God and the church and went their separate ways. Let’s look at the verses a bit deeper and then come back to some practical applications.

Enlightened. John 1:9 shows us that enlightenment doesn’t equal salvation. These people may understand many truths from the Word without following them.

Tasted of the heavenly gift. These professing believers certainly get a taste of what it means to be a Christian. Just for example, many newcomers to church in China, say they like it because they feel peaceful there. The peace they feel is just a taste (like an overflow) of what they would have if they truly turned to Christ. It is something like a guest that stays with a kind family. While they are there, they share many of the same experiences that the children of the parents have. Maybe they receive birthday gifts, join in parties, etc. Finally the time comes for the guests to leave and their relationship with the family is lost over time, but the relationship of the kids with their parents is never lost. A guest in the house of God may have some of these experiences, but they are not part of God’s family.

Partakers of the Holy Spirit – This is the toughest one to understand. Certainly being influenced by the Holy Spirit doesn’t guarantee salvation. Saul is one example as the Holy Spirit came on him and he prophesied, but he was not a true believer. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit works differently coming into the life of a believer. Since we have ruled out the possibility that these verses reference true believers, it must mean something else. It could mean they experienced Jesus’ ministry, which was done through the power of the Spirit. Or they may have experienced the apostles’ ministry, which was also done through the power of the Spirit. Or perhaps the church as a whole receives the Spirit and because they join the group, the “overflow” of the Spirit’s ministry touches their lives too.

Tasted the good word of God. See 4b.

Fallen away – These professing believers one day fall away, just like the what happens to the plant growing on the rocky soil when exposed to the sun.

It is impossible to renew them to repentance – This is a stark warning. There is an invisible line that when crossed it is impossible to come back to God again. We don’t know where this line is exactly, but it shows that some hearts can be hardened to the point of no return. At the point when these people fall away, do they lack any teaching or knowledge? No, they know everything they need to to have a good relationship with Christ. Do they lack experiences? No, they have even experienced the grace of God in some ways because of their connection to the church. It is their own well-informed choice. A choice
that cannot be undone.

Crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame – MacArthur believes this means that they come to the conclusion that Christ should have been put on the cross. In other words, they believe that Jesus was a fake (like the Pharisees did) and that He got what was coming to Him. This extreme rejection of Christ and internal condoning of what happened to Him seals their eternal fate beyond hope of restoration. If that is what this means, then it could mean there is still hope for those in modern day who go to church for a while and stop if they haven’t yet reached that point of no return.

Verses 7-8 – See cross-references. This a warning like the warning about a useless/fruitless tree. A tree that bears no fruit will be destroyed. Verse 7 shows us that the good ground which brings forth good vegetation (because of the rain) will receive a blessing from God. The person who hears and obeys God’s Word, trusting in and following Him will receive the grace from God. Whereas the ground that gets filled up with thorns and thistles is useless to God and will be scorched. A person, even who goes to church and joins the choir and Sunday School, but who doesn't bear fruit for God will be cursed and receive the punishment for their sin, which was never repent of.

**Application** – What applications are there here for us? What should you do based on what you have learned in this passage? What is the warning for us? How should we respond to the warning? How should we treat those who have fallen away from God? Should we give up on them believing that it is impossible for them to turn back to God again? What can you do in the next week as a specific step to grow in maturity?