

About "Christians" who "Fall Away"

Hebrews 6:4-6

**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.**

INTRODUCTION

This passage mentions people who have experienced many of the blessings that Christians experience, but who have apparently "fallen away" and are now no longer able to turn back to Christ in repentance. (This does *not* refer to temporary "backsliding," but to a permanent falling-away.) Interpretations of this "problem passage" are quite varied. On one extreme, we might be told that this "falling away" is only theoretical - that in "real life" it can't happen, because (according to this view) salvation cannot be lost. On the other extreme, we might be told that this passage is proof that a person *can* lose his salvation, and so a person is never able to know for sure that he is saved (since, at any time in the future, he could "fall away").

Notice how these views have superimposed assumptions into the passage. This passage has been assumed, for instance, to be a reference to salvation - yet the word "salvation" does not occur anywhere in these verses. Views about "eternal security" (or the absence thereof) have also made their impact. However, if we accept this passage "as is," without adding assumptions or superimposing already-held theological viewpoints, we discover that the concept of "eternal security" is also absent from these verses.

It will be seen, as we explore this passage (and compare it to other passages), that what is mentioned here is nothing more than an expression of a common theme that can be found many other places throughout the Word (especially in the New Testament).

As we examine this passage, and others like it, we will make the assumption that they are accurate and true, when stated "as is." Our goal is to *not* add to them any already-held theological perspectives, nor to take-away from these verses anything that is directly stated by them.

A CLOSER LOOK AT HEBREWS 6

We will begin with this passage in Hebrews 6. The first thing we need to do is to take a look at the context. We do *not* need to grab verses from other contexts! This passage has a right to exist on its own merit. It does not have to be propped-up with verses we have picked-up elsewhere.

It is a common practice of many, to bring together passages from unrelated contexts, so as to "determine the meaning" of passages that don't say what they want to hear. They take verses that support their already-held viewpoints, "apply" them, so as to determine the interpretation of the verse in question. Then, when they look at the passage, they "see" their viewpoint!*

When we examine the context, we discover that there are two categories of people mentioned. The first category is comprised of those who have "tasted," etc., and who "fall away" - the things mentioned in verses 4-6. But as we look further, we discover that a second group of people are also mentioned: those who have lives characterized by "things that accompany salvation" (verse 9). These two groups are also described in verse 12, as (1) those who are "lazy" (or "sluggish"), contrasted with (2) those who "inherit what has been promised."

Note that the second group is associated with the concept of salvation, and the first group isn't. Doesn't this contrast tell us something? If nothing else, it should at least make us willing to re-examine our previously-held assumptions, to see if they are really expressed by this passage.

At this point, we have two categories of people. And we can describe them in the following terms:

General Statement:

They (the readers) are told that they must go on to maturity; they need to "grow up." (6:1; also the end of chapter 5)

Two Types of Responses:

Group 1	Group 2
Those in this group (v. 4-6): <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Were once enlightened• Have tasted of the heavenly gift• Have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit• Have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come• Have fallen away• Cannot be renewed again to repentance	Those in this group (v. 9-10): <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have things that accompany salvation• Have work and love (shown to God by the way they help God's people)

Group 1	Group 2
Described as ground that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yields thorns and thistles • Is worthless and in danger of being cursed [if conditions don't change] • Ends up being burned (v.8) 	Described as ground that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drinks in the rain which often falls upon it • Brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it was tilled • Receives a blessing from God (v.7)
They are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sluggish (v. 12a) 	They are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diligent (so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end) (v. 11) • Imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit what was promised (v. 12)

Those in the first group have many characteristics that people often associate with being saved. Yet, when the author of Hebrews mentions salvation, he does so *only* with reference to the *second* group. This indicates that, even though the first group has (for a while) many good characteristics, they are *not* the characteristics that identify a person as being saved, distinguishing him from people who are not.

Note that we have not superimposed our own views into this passage. We have NOT claimed anything beyond what the author of Hebrews has claimed - namely that it is the *second* group that has characteristics that "accompany salvation." He does *not* claim that the first category of people are (or ever were) saved.

At this point, we do not necessarily have a full understanding of all the implications of this passage (especially if what we have discovered so far goes against views we have cherished for many years). We may be wondering *how it is possible* for so many "Christian" characteristics to NOT be "things that accompany salvation." But we have allowed the passage to speak on its own (without superimposing our own views into it) and now we are ready to go on to the next part of our study: we are ready to find out if a similar concept exists in other places in the Bible.

As before, we will let each passage remain in its own context, without adding our own theological perspectives. And as we do so, we will discover that this kind of theme occurs many other places.

[NOTES]

*Often, they will describe this practice in a way that sounds good - maybe even "spiritual." They may, for example, call it, "Rightly dividing the Word of Truth." Or "Using Scripture to interpret Scripture." Interestingly, people who reach *opposing* viewpoints will often use the same "slogans" to justify their actions! [For additional comments about adding "interpretational schemes" to the Word, read the article, "Three Characteristics of God's Word, the Bible."]

OTHER PASSAGES IN HEBREWS

First, remaining in the book of Hebrews, we discover that, in chapter 10, there is a contrast between the one who is "my righteous one" and the one who "shrinks back" (verses 36-39). (Note that the term "righteous one" seems to parallel the group described as "saved" in Hebrews 6. And the one who "shrinks back" seems to parallel the one who "falls away.") There is a slight question as to the exact way to translate verse 38, but verse 39 seems to explain the intent of that verse. So with this in mind, we find ourselves with two groups described as follows:

A General statement:

They are told that they need endurance, so that (after having done the will of God) they will receive what was promised (10:36).

Two types of response:

Group 1	Group 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They shrink back; God has no pleasure in them • They shrink back to destruction (v. 38b, 39a) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They live by faith • They have faith to the preserving of the soul (v. 38a, 39b)

One issue, which we might not be able to answer, is whether or not the term "my righteous one" also applies to the second half of verse 38. If so, we then need to determine if the term "righteous" can be used in a sense that does not necessarily imply salvation - at least in some contexts. (A quick study would show that it does, as illustrated by Ezekiel 18 and 33, in the Old Testament, and Matthew 23:28, in the New Testament.)

In chapter 12, we read about another contrast: the "true sons" contrasted with the "illegitimate children."

Two Types of "Sons":

Group 1	Group 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They do not experience discipline • They are not true sons, but illegitimate children (12:8) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They experience hardship as discipline • They are true sons (12:7)

One other passage we will look at, in the book of Hebrews, is chapter 8:8-12. This has to do with two covenants. Note that these covenants have been placed under the two "group" categories used above. This is because the first group/covenant represents people who the Lord "turned away from," whereas the second group/covenant represents people who the Lord calls "my people." This parallels the thoughts described in the passages we have already examined. [Hebrews 9:4 is included because of its contrast with 8:10.]

Two Covenants

Group 1	Group 2
The Old Covenant (8:9): <ul style="list-style-type: none">• [God's laws on two stone tablets - Heb. 9:4]• They did not remain faithful to the covenant• The Lord turned away from them	The New Covenant (8:10-12): <ul style="list-style-type: none">• God's laws in their minds and hearts• "I will be their God, and they will be my people."• They will all know the Lord• Their wickedness and sins will all be forgiven

Note that in these Hebrews passages, the people represented by "Group 1" have been exposed to the Word. They even have (or had) many characteristics that seem to be "Christian" (or the Old Testament equivalent). Yet nowhere in the text does it say that they were saved. For there were certain things missing - things that are the distinguishing factor, as far as their eternal salvation is concerned. It DOES say, however, that, at least in certain matters, they fully comprehend what Christianity is all about ...and that their rejection of it is deliberate, without excuse and (at least in some instances) permanent. [Jude 22-23 suggests that there may be hope for some.]

PETER'S TESTIMONY

We will now proceed to find out if a similar theme exists elsewhere in Scripture. We will start with 2 Peter 1:5-11. In this passage, we read about a contrast between (1) those who are "shortsighted and blind," who have forgotten about being "cleansed" from their "past sins," and (2) those who "add to their faith" the qualities listed in verses 5-7, and who make sure that they have been "called" and "chosen" by God.

In the immediately preceding context, we are told that God has freely given us everything we need for life and godliness, so that we can be partakers of the "divine nature" and escape the corruption in the world that is caused by evil desires. The term "divine nature" does NOT mean we become deity, but that we are able to have the "nature" - the moral characteristics - that God has. This is why we are told to "add" to our faith the characteristics mentioned in verses 5-7. If we belong to God, he has given us the power to do so!

As in Hebrews 6, we see both a general statement (a command that the people are to obey) as well as two types of people (based on the way they respond to the command).

General Statement:

We must "add" various godly characteristics to our faith (v. 5-7; "in increasing measure" - v.8).

Two responses:

Group 1	Group 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They do not have these qualities [at least in increasing measure, compare with v. 8] • They are nearsighted and blind • They have forgotten that they have been cleansed* from their past sins (1:9) <p>*[Note that this word "cleansed" is often used of Jewish ceremonial "purification rites" (Mark 1:44, Luke 2:22, John 2:6, 3:25; etc.) and does not necessarily imply salvation.]</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They possess these qualities in increasing measure • They are kept from being "ineffective and unproductive" in their knowledge of Jesus Christ (compare with 3:18 - a command to grow in knowledge) • They have made their calling and election sure • They will never fall, but will be richly welcomed into the eternal kingdom (1:8, 10-11)

As before, we find two distinct groups of people. The first group has many characteristics that we often associate with being "Christian." But it is the second group that is described as having a part in the eternal kingdom.

The last half of 2 Peter 1 makes reference to the apostles and prophets, and how their message was a message from God himself. Chapter 2, in contrast, describes a different group: the false teachers, whose message consists of lies of their own invention. In many ways, these false teachers may have once seemed to be "Christian," but Peter tells us that any past similarity is now gone. Though they may have once looked good in many ways, they actually belong to what we have been describing as "Group 1" people.

What they were like in the past:	What they are now like:	Reference:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In some sense, they were "bought" by the Lord 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They have denied him (with their false teachings), and will one day receive "swift destruction" and "condemnation" 	2:1, 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In some sense, they were on the "straight way" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They have wandered off the straight way 	2:15
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In some sense, they once escaped the world's corruption through knowing Jesus Christ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are again entangled and overcome by the world's corruption 	2:20
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They knew the way of righteousness - at least some aspects of it (verse 12 says that there are things they don't understand) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They turned their backs on the holy command that was passed on to them 	2:21

What they were like in the past:	What they are now like:	Reference:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Like a dog: [They had purged their stomachs of their vomit] (implied) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They have returned to their vomit (to eat it again) 	2:22
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Like a pig: The "mud" that covers them had been washed off [compare to 1:9: their "cleansing" was only "external"] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They have returned to the mud, to roll around in it 	2:22
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> [They had many characteristics we normally consider "Christian"] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They are contrasted with "godly people" and will someday receive a horrible (but deserved) eternal condemnation 	all of chapter 2

Peter describes these false teachers as having "fully known the way of righteousness" and then as having turned their backs to the "holy command" that had been passed on to them. They have no excuse for their actions, and will be judged accordingly. But does this mean that they were once saved, and have lost their salvation? Peter does not make any such claim. Rather than jumping to any conclusions, it would be better for us to remember that Hebrews 6 also lists various "Christian" characteristics and does NOT equate them with "things that accompany salvation." It would be better for us to continue our study without jumping to such a conclusion. If such a conclusion is merited, it will be found in the Word *without* our superimposing it into the Word.

JAMES' TESTIMONY

We will now turn to the book of James. In this book, we are told that it is the Word that can save us. However, if we merely listen to the Word, and fail to do what it says, we end-up with self-deception, instead. We must not merely listen, but do what it says. (1:22)

Again, merely being "religious" is not enough. If one's "religion" does not result in a change in conduct (in this passage, the focus being on one's speech), we are once again self-deceived: our "religion" is worthless. Religion that God considers acceptable has an influence on one's conduct. It results in the expression of love - both toward God (purification and avoidance of sin) and toward our "neighbor." (Note that James does *not* use the word "religion" as a synonym for "being a Christian.") (1:26-27)

Again, merely having "faith" - a faith that does not influence one's conduct - is not enough. Such a "faith" is totally useless. It is dead; it has no power to save anyone. As with the previous items, James tells us that there must be an effect on one's conduct: a living faith will result in the expression of "life." It is *not* dead. We must not merely make "claims" about faith; we must *live* it. (2:14-26)

James also talks about wisdom. Again, there is a genuine and a counterfeit. One is from God; the other from the devil. (3:13-18)

Below is a summary of James' comparison between the "genuine" with the "counterfeit." This shows us that there are many "Christian" characteristics that can be imitated, to one degree or another, by those who have unchanged lives. (Verse references are given in the above paragraphs.)

CHARACTERISTIC:	IF IT IS "COUNTERFEIT" [Group 1]:	IF IT IS "GENUINE" [Group 2]:
ACCEPTANCE OF THE WORD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening without an effect on one's conduct • RESULT: Deceived 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening and doing what it says • RESULT: Blessed in what he does
BEING "RELIGIOUS"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No change in one's conduct (focus in this passage: on what the person says). • RESULT: Deceived; worthless religion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purity in one's own life ("being unpolluted") and love expressed toward others (the "helpless") • RESULT: "Religion" accepted by God
HAVING "FAITH"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No effect on conduct • RESULT: Dead, useless faith; Not saved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seen by its effect on conduct • RESULT: Justified
HAVING "WISDOM"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-centered • RESULT: Disorder and every evil practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ["Other-centered"] Shown by one's actions, done in humility • RESULT: Peace; a harvest of righteousness

JOHN'S TESTIMONY

The apostle John talks about those who were "among us" but who left, proving that they weren't really "of us" (1 John 2:19). He contrasts them with those who demonstrate the love of God and who "purify" themselves, following Jesus' example (1 John 3:3). Those in this second group do this, because they have "this hope" [of being like Christ when he returns] within them. The others may claim they have fellowship with God, but since their lives are characterized by "darkness," they are nothing but liars (1 John 1:6) - though they themselves may be convinced otherwise.

As you look through this list, note that those who belong to "Group 1" make many claims. But their claims are NOT backed-up by their lives.

Group 1	Group 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They claim to have fellowship with God, but they walk in darkness; they are liars (1:6) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They walk in the light; this shows that they have fellowship with God (1:7)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They claim to know God, but do not do what he commands; they are liars (2:5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They obey God's commands; this shows that they know God; they know they must walk as Jesus did (2:3,6)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They claim to be in the light, but they hate their brothers; they are still in darkness ... and don't even know it (2:9, 11) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They love their brothers; this shows that they are in the light (2:10)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [At least some of them:] They have abandoned the truth (2:22 and context) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They know they must continue / remain in the truth, if they want to remain in Christ (2:24 and context)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They keep on sinning; they have neither seen nor known God (3:6, 8); they do not do what is right, nor do they love their brothers: they do not know God (3:10) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They know that everyone who does what is right has been born of God (2:29); they purify themselves (3:3); they do what is right (3:7); they are not able to continue in sin (3:9)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They do not love God; they do not know God (4:8) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They love each other, showing that God's <i>love</i>, as well as <i>God himself</i>, are both in them (4:12. 16)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They do not love their brothers, so they are liars, even though they claim to love God (4:20) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They love God and so they obey him (5:3). And because they love/obey God, they also love his children (5:1-2). (Love to God and love to "brothers" are inseparable.)

It is very significant to realize that John writes this book in order that we can *know* that we have eternal life (5:13). Many people *claim* to be children of God. But only those who *obey* him are *really* his children.

Interestingly, the apostle wrote the gospel of John so that we would *be able to* believe in who Jesus is, and through faith, have eternal life (John 20:31). But how do you know that the faith you claim to have is truly "saving faith"? 1 John was written so that we could *know* if we have the type of faith that results in eternal life. Many people are deceived into thinking they have "saving faith," whereas their lives prove them wrong (1 John 3:7).

Yes, it is "through faith" in Jesus that we can have eternal life (John 20:31); works *can never* earn our salvation. But the "faith" the Bible speaks well of, is a faith that *overcomes sin*. (1 John 5:4).

PAUL'S TESTIMONY

The apostle Paul mentions, time and again, the *change* that takes place when a person is saved. Everyone has an obligation to obey God, but because of sin, we have all failed to do so. However, when God saves a person, he also *changes* him. So the changed person begins to have the desire to obey God - and also begins to have the willingness to *learn how to do so*. (In other words, his desire to obey God is not an "empty" desire, but one that results in action.) And because this is so, Paul is able to talk about the "obedience of faith" - that is, the obedience that comes as the result of faith (Romans 1:5; 16:26).

God gave the apostle Paul a mission: to take to the Gentiles (non-Jews) a message about a faith in God that would result in "sanctification" - a holy life (Acts 20:18). And just how did he accomplish this? Here is Paul's own description of what he preached: "... that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance." (Acts 26:20b). This last phrase can also be translated like this: "proving their repentance by the good things they do."

"Repentance" means to change the way one thinks and acts. It results in a changed life. So unless a person's life (and thoughts) are changed, how can he truthfully claim that he has repented? Interestingly, in every instance in which the words "repentance" and "believe" (or "faith") occur together, the word "repentance" always comes first! (Matthew 21:32; Mark 1:15; Acts 20:21 and Hebrews 6:1) Clearly this underscores the need for a change, when one claims to "believe" the good news (or "gospel")!

The apostle Paul often speaks about the effect that "faith" will have on one's life. He acknowledges the role that God has, in changing our lives, but he also looks at the issue from the perspective of *our responsibility*. (He considers both of these concepts to be true.) Over and over, he reminds us of our obligation to obey God. Here are some examples:

(1) Paul reminds us that God's "grace" *teaches* us how to live (Titus 2:11-12), but he also tells us that we must be *willing to learn* to do what is good (Titus 3:14). And though he assures us that God will finish the work he began in us (Philippians 1:6), he also tells us to "work out" (*not* "work for") our salvation (Philippians 2:12) *because* God is working in us (verse 13).

(2) In Christ, we are "new creations" (2 Corinthians 5:17), with "new life" (Romans 6:4, Ephesians 2:5; Colossians 3:10, etc.), able to do good works (Ephesians 2:10) because we serve a "new master" (Romans 6:17, 22). [If all this is true of us - and it is, if we belong to Christ - we can't say that we *don't* have the ability to obey!]

(3) There will be a constant need to fight the impulses and desires of the "flesh" - our former way of life, our old habits and inclinations (Romans 7). But in Christ - who is our life (Colossians 3:4) - we can overcome. So we are no longer controlled by our old "nature" (the "flesh"). In contrast, those who *are* controlled by their old "nature" do not belong to Christ (Romans 8) - whether or not they claim to have "faith."

Over and over, Paul reminds us that it is by God's undeserved kindness (or "grace") that we are saved (example: Ephesians 2:6, 8-9). Salvation is a gift from God (Romans 6:23). Clearly, works *will not* influence our salvation ... but salvation *will* influence our works!

JESUS' TESTIMONY

Jesus often mentions the same themes we have already seen expressed by the apostles*, namely: 1) the need for a faith that results in a changed life, and 2) the fact that many people believe they are saved - and often will have various characteristics we tend to associate with being a "Christian" - yet they will not really be genuine disciples (followers) of Jesus. One only needs to study the concept of "disciple" to discover this!

Like James, Jesus tells us that it is the person who hears the Word of God *and obeys it*, who will be blessed (Luke 11:28, see also Matthew 7:24-27). In contrast, there will be many others who, though involved in many religious activities, do *not* obey the Word. They may even call Jesus "Lord"!** But to them Jesus will say, "I never knew you" (Matthew 7:23). Do you want to be one of God's "children"? Jesus tells us that the members of his family are not those who merely *hear* his words. Rather, they also *obey* them (Luke 8:21).

Like John, Jesus tells us that love must have a place in our lives. But whereas the apostle John focuses on the necessity of love for our "brother," Jesus tells us that our love must be expressed toward *everyone*. If we love *only* those who love us back, we are doing nothing more than what even *pagans* can do! It is love expressed toward *enemies* that distinguishes those who are sons of the "Father in heaven" from those who are not (Matthew 5:43-47).

Jesus often mentions the concept of "fruit." He tells us that people will be recognized by their "fruit" - the things they do. This applies not only to false teachers, who we must watch out for (Matthew 7:16), but it is a general principle that applies to all of us (Luke 6:43-45, etc.).

This concept of "fruit" is also seen in a parable that Jesus told, about a farmer who planted seed. Different things happen to the seed (representing the Word), depending on the type of soil it lands on (representing different responses people have). In one case, there is no response to the word - it is like the seed that birds pick up and eat (Luke 8:12). In two cases, there is genuine growth - but eventually that growth comes to nothing. In one of these instances, the people "receive the message with joy" (they "believe"), but they later turn away (Luke 8:13) when things don't go their way. In the other instance, they look good for a while, but their hearts are focused on the things of the world, and their lives remain fruitless. In only one case (represented by the "good" soil) do the people have "good and noble" hearts and (as a result) they bear fruit. It is important to note that, for a while, *three* of the types of "soil" looked good; it was only later that "reality" became evident.

[NOTES]

* This shouldn't surprise us. After all, they learned it from him!

**Paul also talks about calling Jesus "Lord," in 1 Corinthians 12:3. But in that context, he is not making reference to the superficial claims that Jesus' listeners were prone to make. To the Corinthians, to call Jesus "Lord" necessitated a rejection of their former idolatrous ways. And such a drastic change could *not* occur unless the Spirit of God was working in their hearts.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT (A Quick Glance)

We would hope that these examples from various authors in the New Testament - the author of Hebrews, Peter, James, John and Paul, and the words of Jesus (as quoted in the gospels) - would suffice to show that the message is the same throughout the New Testament. Yet even in the Old Testament, this message is the same. Read the words of the prophets, who wrote against people who *thought* they were acceptable to God. Often, the people were involved in many religious activities. But they neglected the type of obedience that God says is *more important* than even the sacrifices he required from them: an obedience that expresses itself in love toward God and toward other people.

God commanded the people to offer sacrifices to him. Yet we read that obedience is more important than sacrifices (1 Samuel 15:22). We read that the "sacrifice" of one's heart is more important than the sacrifice of one's animals (Psalm 51:16-17). And as far as our relationship to other people is concerned, there is no reason to expect God to listen to our prayers, as long as we are neglecting our "neighbor" (Isaiah 58). Even the symbolic rite of circumcision was intended to represent spiritual realities of the heart - Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4. Yet most of the people reduced it to a mere external ritual and had no concern with the spiritual issues it symbolized.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the Word, we read about people who look "good" on the outside, but who are "rotten to the core" on the inside. The "false prophet" (or "false teacher"), who was described in 2 Peter, is a good example of this. Jesus described the religious leaders of his day as "whitewashed tombs," *because* they looked wonderful on the outside, though on the inside they were full of "dead men's bones" (Matthew 23:27). The people considered those leaders to be everything that godly, religious leaders ought to be. Yet those leaders were the very ones who were *preventing* the people from entering the kingdom of heaven! (23:13) Instead of becoming children of God, the people were becoming "children of hell" (v. 15).

Many people seem to forget that the whole concept of "false prophet" implies the ability of an evil person to look good. If they looked "bad" (on the outside), how many people would follow them? Paul wouldn't have had to describe their master (Satan) as one who "masquerades as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14).*

Furthermore, the whole idea of "deception" implies the capability of a person to falsely assume he is saved, when he isn't. People have the tendency to focus on "religious qualifications" that do *not* distinguish between those who are saved and those who are not. (This means that unsaved people can possess these qualities.) This is why warnings against deception occur dozens of times in the Scriptures.

An unsaved person may look "totally saved" for a while. He may have all the "religious criteria" that most people look for. He can experience many of the "temporary" blessings of salvation - though his experience will be only "skin deep" - that is, it does not come from a changed heart. He can "clean up" his lifestyle (what people see) even though the things that God looks for (in the heart) are absent. "Getting religious" can do more good than making "New Year's resolutions"! Even the mere *presence* of Christians in a unbeliever's "environment" can have a beneficial restraining power in his actions: it can have "positive" influences on him, at least in this present life, whether or not he ever gets saved!

In several of the passages above, people are described as having many of the characteristics of a Christian, yet they are NOT described as being saved. This would probably be very easy to accept, if it were not for the fact that many people assume that "believing," "tasting the heavenly gift," "being cleansed," "knowing the way of righteousness," and all the rest, are another way of saying that the person has salvation. Yet Scripture shows that each of these characteristics can be present in a "genuine Christian" or in a "fake."

This is the reason that Peter tells us to make our calling and election "sure" (2 Peter 1:10). This is why Paul says, "Examine yourselves to see whether or not you are in the faith" (2 Corinthians 13:5), and Jesus says, "Strive to enter the straight gate, for many will try to enter and will not succeed" (Luke 13:24). And this is why many who say "Lord, Lord ..." will be told, "I never knew you" (Matthew 7:21-22; Luke 6:46). In the Old Testament, this is why the whole nation of Israel (with a few exceptions) could "flip-flop" back and forth between worshiping the LORD at one time and worshiping false gods at another (the entire book of Joshua illustrates this). Finally, this is why the people could shout praises to the Son of Man one day, and then shout, "Crucify him!" a few days later.

Simply stated, the first group has a "salvation" that is only "skin-deep" - that is, based on surrounding influences, rather than on changes in the heart. They may think they have eternal life, and may even live "Christianly." In Jesus' day, they may have fully obeyed "the letter of the Law" - though denying its "spirit," or true meaning. (Paul originally did this, Philippians 3:4-6.) They may know lots of theology or have lots of "religious experience." Others may look at them and think that they are wonderful examples of "what Christians are supposed to be like." But eventually, they will be exposed for what they are. For although they looked good in many ways, the "fruit" of a changed life was never present.

In contrast, those in the second group have a change that originates in the heart and radiates outward. God has had an active role in that change. People in this group may temporarily "backslide" (though God would discipline them to bring them back - Heb. 12**), but in the long run their fruit will also be obvious. As Hebrews 6 says, *they will have the things which accompany salvation!*

[NOTES]

*[This whole idea should not be surprising, for the world tends to judge people by their external appearance or by the possessions they own. People flock to the beautiful or rich or famous person, and avoid those who are considered "less than average" or "nobodies." Even childhood books tend to portray people this way! "Good" people tend to look good, and "bad" people tend to look bad.]

** (The other alternative, if the person is truly saved, is that God will "take him home." 1 Corinthians 11:30.)

There are other characteristics mentioned in the Word, which distinguish between those who *are* and those who *aren't* genuine disciples of Jesus. But those mentioned above should suffice to show that more than mere claims or appearances is necessary, before a person can truthfully claim to belong to Jesus.

We would encourage you to follow the admonition given by Jesus and the apostles, to examine yourself and to *make sure* that you *truly* belong to God. *Now* is the time to do so; to wait until the Day of Justice to find out whether or not you were mistaken, is to wait too long.

ARE YOU A CHRISTIAN?

[The characteristics mentioned in the three sections, below, have to do with "lifestyle" - what your life is characterized by. It is possible for a Christian to temporarily act like a non-Christian, just as it is possible for a non-Christian to temporarily act like a Christian.]

- You can be "enlightened" to the truth, and can "taste" how good God's Word is ... and still not be a Christian. (Hebrews 6:4-6)
- You can experience (at least in part) many of the blessings that a Christian would experience - God's gifts and an awareness of the Spirit's presence ... and still not be a Christian. (Hebrews 6:4-6)
- You can be "bought" by the Lord (at least in some sense of the word); you can be influenced by "the way of righteousness," so that you are on the "straight way," escaping the "world's corruption," and "clean" ... and still not be a Christian. (2 Peter 2)
- You can listen to the Word of God, be very "religious," and even claim to have "faith" and "wisdom" ... and still not be a Christian. (James 1-3)
- You can claim that you know God and that you have fellowship with him, love him, and are in the "light" ... and still not be a Christian. (1 John 1:6, 2:5, 9, 11; 4:20)
- You can claim that Jesus is "Lord," and even perform many spectacular works ... and still not be a Christian. (Matthew 7:21-23)
- You can look "righteous" to others ... and still not be a Christian. (Matthew 5:20, 23:28)
- You can have love for your friends ... and still not be a Christian. (Matthew 5:43-47)

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- If your life is characterized by "fruitlessness" ("thorns and thistles") ... you have no basis for claiming you are a Christian. (Hebrews 6:7-8)
 - If your life is characterized by laziness in following the examples of godly people of the past (contrasted with diligence) - example, Hebrews 11 ... you have no basis for claiming you are a Christian. (Hebrews 6:12)
 - If your life is characterized by "shrinking back" when you experience trials (so as to avoid them) ... you have no basis for claiming you are a Christian. (Hebrews 10:39 + context)
 - If your life is characterized by *absence* of discipline (from God) ... you have no basis for claiming you are a Christian. (Hebrews 12:8 + context)

- If your life is characterized by religious activities and rituals, but not by obedience to God, self-sacrifice and love for neighbor (including "neighbors" you don't like) ... you have no basis for claiming you are a Christian. (1 Samuel 15:22; Psalm 51:16-17; Isaiah 58, etc.)
 - If your life is characterized by the absence of growth in the Christian character traits (listed in 2 Peter 1:5-7) ... you have no basis for claiming you are a Christian. (2 Peter 1:5-11)
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- If your life is characterized by "fruit" that pleases God ("a good crop") ... you are a genuine Christian. (Hebrews 6:7; also Luke 8:15, etc.)
- If your life is characterized by a type of love toward God that expresses itself in a love toward other Christians (and you are "diligent" in expressing this love) ... you are a genuine Christian. (Hebrews 6:9-11; 1 John 2:10; 5:1-3)
- If your life is characterized by genuine love for your enemies ... you are a genuine Christian. (Matthew 5:43-47)
- If your life is characterized by faith (trust in God) and patience, especially when you experience trials ... you are a genuine Christian. (Hebrews 6:12; Hebrews 10:39 + context)
- If your life is characterized by *the presence of discipline* (from God) and you interpret "hardship" (when it is present) as one aspect of that discipline ... you are a genuine Christian. (Hebrews 12:7 + context)
- If your life is characterized by the *desire* to obey God [in other words, if his laws have been "imprinted" on your heart and mind] ... you are a genuine Christian. (Hebrews 8:10-12)
- If your life is characterized by an increase or growth in the Christian character traits (listed in 2 Peter 1:5-7) ... you are a genuine Christian. (2 Peter 1:5-11)
- If your life is characterized by not only hearing the Word, but by obeying it ... you are a genuine Christian. (James 1:22, Luke 11:28)
- If your "religion" and your "faith" result in a change in your conduct - an increase in holiness and love toward others - and in obedience to God ... you are a genuine Christian. (James 1 and 2)
- If your "wisdom" results in a humble expression of love and goodness to others ... you are a genuine Christian. (James 3:13-18)
- If your life is characterized by "light," by obedience to God and by "remaining in the truth" ... you are a genuine Christian. (1 John 1:7, 2:3, 6)
- If your life is characterized by doing what is right, by purifying yourself, and by not continuing in a lifestyle of sin ... you are a genuine Christian. (1 John 2:29, 3:3, 7, 9)
- If your faith results in obedience, if it is associated with a repentance that expresses itself in godly actions ... you are a genuine Christian. (Romans 1:5; 16:26; Acts 26:20b, etc.)
- If your life is characterized by learning to turn away from ungodliness and worldly passions, so that you live in a self-controlled, upright and godly manner, instead ... you are a genuine Christian. (Titus 2:11-12)
- If your life is characterized by fighting the impulses of the "flesh" (or "corrupt nature") rather than by giving-in to those impulses ... you are a genuine Christian. (Romans 7 and 8)