



A Covenant Reading of the Warning Passage in Hebrews 6: 4-8

JIANG Tian (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School)

Abstract: The warning passages in Hebrews demonstrate the two sides of salvation - redemption and judgment - a dichotomy consistent with the covenant model. The primary debate among scholars over these warning passages is whether Christians will lose their salvation. Hebrews 6:4-8 is the center of all warning passages, and interpretations of these passages are divided into two leading schools of thought, Arminianism and Calvinism. This paper attempts to combine the Arminian and Calvinist readings of the warning passages through the lens of covenant theology and to demonstrate that the warning passages in Hebrews are the same as the warning passages elsewhere in the New Testament, which uses the Old Testament covenant model. The New Testament authors imitated the Old Testament prophets in warning the covenant people, both community and individual, not to bring judgment but to call for repentance. The prophetic warning passages in Hebrews are not a judgment on the apostate's final state of salvation, but a call to repentance.

Keywords: Covenant, Hebrews, repentance

DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.29635/JRCC.202306_\(20\).0004](http://dx.doi.org/10.29635/JRCC.202306_(20).0004)

GRAMMATICAL, TEXTUAL, AND LEXICOGRAPHICAL ISSUES

The immediate context of verses 4-6 is an exhortation (the subjunctive of $\phi\epsilon\rho\acute{\omega}\mu\epsilon\theta\alpha$ in verse 1 indicates an exhortation, not discipline).¹ The author of

¹ Elder argues that the other three warning passages in Hebrews (5:11-6:20, 10:26-39, 12:25-39) are also often understood "to be functioning in a hortatory, exhortative, or paranaetic



Hebrews uses the first person in verses 1-3 and the third person in verses 4-8, which also implies that he believes his readers are not apostates.¹ The ἀγαπητοί in verse 9 also indicates that the author is convinced that they can hold on to salvation.² Therefore, this warning passage is for Christians to understand the importance of holding on to the faith to the end. This is consistent with Jesus' discourse on the Mount of Olives that "the one who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matthew 24:13 NIV). It is the lifelong follower of Christ that can "move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity" (Hebrews 6:1).

Verses 4-6 use five participles (φωτισθέντας, γευσάμενους, γεννηθέντας, γευσάμενους and παραπεσόντας) to form one sentence. The sentence is structured starting with an article (τοὺς) with a series of participles linked by τε...καὶ...καὶ...καὶ. According to Granville Sharp's rule, each participle should modify the same article.³ Although these five participles are parallel in terms of syntax, the relationship between these participles is still under debate, especially the fifth participle. Many believe the fifth participle παραπεσόντας should be

manner." Nicholas A. Elder, "The Oratorical and Rhetorical Function of Hebrews 6:4-12," *Conversations with the Biblical World* 34 (2014): 252.

¹ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1993), 317-18.

² Dr. Harris argues that the τὰ κρείσσονα in verse 9 "parallel the land that receives a blessing in Heb 6:7, which is associated with persevering faith." See Dana M. Harris, "The Eternal Inheritance in Hebrews: The Appropriation of the Old Testament Inheritance Motif by the Author of Hebrews" (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2009), 195.

³ Although the structure does not strictly obey Granville Sharp's rule, the first four participles can be identified as substantival participles. What is more, the placement of the adverb ἅπαξ implies that "each participle applies to the same group" see Dana M. Harris, Andreas J. Köstenberger, and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Hebrews* (Nashville, UNITED STATES: B&H Publishing Group, 2019), 11n, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tiu/detail.action?docID=5973414>.



considered as an adverbial participle because it is far away from the article τοὺς. This is a possible scenario, but I tend to see all the five participles as adjectival participles. So my translation of the παραπεσόντας is "those...who have fallen away". I think the second to fourth participles should explain further the experience to which the first participle refers, that is, the person who has experienced being enlightened. According to the context, being enlightened includes three parts: having tasted (γευσαμένους) the heavenly gift, having become (γεννηθέντας) sharers of the Holy Spirit, and having tasted (γευσαμένους) the good word of God and the powers of the coming age. Therefore, the main structure of this sentence can be understood as follows: Those who are enlightened once and who have fallen away from the truth are impossible to restore again to repentance.

The word ἀδύνατον indicates that it is impossible for God to restore apostates to repentance (μετάνοια). On the one hand, God is not willing to save the apostate demonstrating the sovereignty of God. On the other hand, the author of Hebrews says that it is impossible to restore to repentance, not grace (being enlightened). Repentance is an act of faith; the inability to repent is essentially the absence of saving faith.¹ Therefore, the word ἀδύνατον points to those who have not been born again. The emphasis in this warning passage is on the essence of salvation, not on Christian identity or experience. One who is not born again, although he has experienced God's grace, may still end up in apostasy.

According to BDAG, the word ἅπαξ can point to "a single occurrence" or

¹ Koester argues that repentance "refers to a decisive movement from sin to death." Therefore, the inability of these apostates to repent shows that their sins are not forgiven. See more discussion by Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 1st ed., The Anchor Bible ; v. 36 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 312–13.



"decisively unique, once for all."¹ However, as we can see from the "again" (πάλιν) in verse 6, the ἄπαξ, in this case, should be a quantitative once, which is the "Christian initiation."² In either case, the author emphasizes that the experience of "being enlightened" is not repeatable. To be "enlightened" means to be transformed in one's inner life (BDAG, 1074) and also indicates one can see and receive the knowledge of the truth (Heb 10:26,32).³

The participle γευσάμενους (γεύομαι) describes a thoroughly Christian experience of those who have been enlightened.⁴ The author of Hebrews uses the same word γεύομαι to describe that Jesus Christ tasted of death for everyone (Heb 2:9). Therefore, both "tasted the heavenly gift" and "tasted the good word of God and the powers of the coming age" manifest they have received and experienced God's sufficient grace. What is more, the double usage of γεύομαι also indicates a personal relationship engagement.⁵ The apostates become (γίνομαι) sharers (μετόχους) in the Holy Spirit manifests they are in the work of God. Ellingworth argues that μετόχους "suggests a less than fully personal activity of the Holy Spirit at this point."⁶ Just like their ancestors in the

¹ Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*, Third edition. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 97.

² See the discussion by Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2010), 220.

³ See the discussion of linguistic and conceptual parallels between φωτισθέντας and Exodus 13:21, Nehemiah 9:12. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 221.

⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 184.

⁵ Allen suggests that "it shares an appeal both to the inaugurating the Pentecostal gift of the Spirit among the community and also the evidential function that such a gift had for the reception of the new covenant", see David M Allen, "'The Forgotten Spirit': A Pentecostal Reading of the Letter to the Hebrews?," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 18.1 (2009): 57.

⁶ Ellingworth also believes that "elsewhere (especially 9:8;10:15), the personal activities of the Holy Spirit is associated with revelation in scripture." Therefore, they enjoyed the fullness of



wilderness, although all were led out of Egypt by God, most of them perished because they did not have true faith. The following words ῥῆμα and δυνάμεις also recall the Exodus.¹ Therefore, the author does not deny that apostates have these experiences but warns those who have these experiences not to take them as a guarantee of salvation. The true believers will hold on to the hope even to the end (Heb 6:11).

According to TLG, the compound word ἀνασταυροῦντας appears 37 times, but only once in the NT, with the remaining occurrence in the early Church Fathers' literature, also in the discussion of Hebrews 6:6. The word ἀνασταυρόω in Josephus or other extra-biblical Greek simply means "crucify, with the idea of nailing someone up ἀνά on a cross."² However, Ellingworth argues that ἀνασταυροῦντας should translate to "recrucifying" in the immediate context. Since the redemption of the cross of Jesus Christ has been fully accomplished, to crucify Jesus again would mean denying the salvation of Christ. This is why the author emphasizes that it was the apostates themselves (ἑαυτοῖς) who recrucified Jesus. The logical relationship between ἀνασταυροῦντας and παραδειγματίζοντας is not clear, but I tend to take them as the reason for why the restoration is impossible. This also proves that these apostates did not possess the true salvation of Christ but only experienced the effects that salvation brings.

This image from nature describes the end of the apostates. As the Gospel records, fig trees that do not bear fruit are to be cut down, and those that do not bear good fruit are to be thrown into the fire (Matthew 7:16-20; Luke 3:8-9,

God's grace, both for individual and collective salvation. See, Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 321.

¹ Harris, Köstenberger, and Yarbrough, *Hebrews*, 110.

² Ellingworth argues that the crucifixion in Hebrews must be a "fresh crucifixion." See the discussion by Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 324-25.



6:43-44, 13:6-9). Μεταλαμβάνει is modified by ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ, which points to the ultimate benefactor. Agricultural metaphors such as land and rain are also a theme of blessings and curses in the Old Testament.¹ The phrase κατάρας ἐγγύς can be translated as "a curse hangs over it," which demonstrates God's severest final judgment.² Therefore, the image of "thorns and thistles" does not point to discipline but the final judgment. This is similar to the prophetic language of warning and judgment in the OT. However, even the most severe warnings of the prophets in the OT were not intended to bring Israel to destruction, but to compel them to repentance through warnings. I believe the author of Hebrews also used this prophetic warning to bring these "apostates" to repentance.

THE WARNING PASSAGES IN THE OT BACKGROUNDS

The majority of the readers of Hebrews would have been people of Jewish background.³ However, Gentiles were likely included, especially the "God-fearers" who were influenced by Judaism.⁴ The author of Hebrews implies that the readers are in the midst of persecution and suffering (Hebrews 2:18; 10:32-34; 12:4; 13:13). This external pressure may well have led Christians to retreat to Judaism, where they would not have been persecuted because Judaism at that time was protected by the Roman government (Religio Licita).⁵ Therefore, the author of Hebrews warns that apostates will suffer severe consequences.

¹ Harris, Köstenberger, and Yarbrough, *Hebrews*, 11r.

² Peter Thomas O'Brien, *God Has Spoken in His Son: A Biblical Theology of Hebrews*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 39 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 190.

³ Not all readers of Hebrews are necessarily Jewish. Recent studies suggest that it was likely written to "Gentiles who were influenced by the observance of Jewish customs." See the discussion by Constantine R. Campbell, *Reading the New Testament as Christian Scripture: A Literary, Canonical, and Theological Survey*, *Reading Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2020), 406.

⁴ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Hebrews: A Guide* (London; T & T Clark, 2006), 38.

⁵ O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 13.



Hebrews uses a lot of OT background, so we have to read the warning passages in a larger OT context. In this warning passage, for example, the author refers to these impossible-to-repent people as apostates. However, on the one hand, the word ἀφέντες (6:1) does not necessarily refer to the absolute apostasy in the OT.¹ We cannot assume that these apostates do not have any possibility of repentance either. On the other hand, the apostasy in the OT often points to the whole Israelites as the covenant people. The covenant people were not always the elect, and many Israelites were not saved in the OT. As Moses warned the Israelites in the wilderness, although they were in the covenant, they proved that they were not the elect when they all eventually died out due to apostasy caused by unbelief. Hebrews 6:4-8 uses the third person to warn against those apostates among the covenant people but uses the second person (ὁμῶν) in verse 9 to contrast (δὲ) the elect as having (ἐχόμενα) salvation.

The author of Hebrews uses OT typology to show God's salvation, such as using the Israelites in the Exodus to describe the author's contemporary community of believers. In other words, the author considers his readers the new Exodus community. I agree with Gleason that "the author's rich use of Old Testament citations and allusions are vital to a proper understanding of the spiritual condition of those warned, the danger of falling away (3:12), the impossibility of repentance (6:6), and the nature of the coming judgment (6:8)."² Therefore, I believe the author of Hebrews was probably imitating Moses in warning the church of his day not to turn away from God as the Israelites had

¹ David Lewis Allen, *Hebrews*, New American Commentary 35 (Nashville, Tenn: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 381.

² However, I disagree with Gleason that they are "genuine believers in danger of forfeiting covenant blessings and of undergoing the physical discipling of God while escaping final judgment." See the discussion of the OT background of Hebrews by Gleason, Herbert W. Bateman, and Gareth Lee Cockerill, *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Kregel Publications, 2007), 340-57.



done in the Exodus. Most Israelites died in the wilderness, and God was not pleased with them (1 Corinthians 10:5). God warned them through Moses and urged them to repent, but those Israelites who perished reflected their lack of true faith. This is precisely what the author of Hebrews was concerned about and why the author used these warning passages.

The warnings of Hebrews against apostasy and perseverance in faith are consistent with the other books of the NT.¹ For example, in 1 John, the apostle warned against the Antichrist and the practice of the hope of eternal life in faith. There are many similar teachings in the NT that seem contradictory, such as Paul's justification by faith and James' justification by works. Faith and works are two sides of the same coin, and they are not contradictory, but both are essential. The apostate's "inability to repent" as stated in Hebrews does not conflict with the teaching of salvation elsewhere in the Scriptures. The gospel of Jesus Christ includes not only salvation but also warning and judgment. Salvation and judgment are also two sides of the gospel. Therefore, we need to understand the warning passages in Hebrews in a larger context of the NT.

A COVENANT READING OF HEBREWS 6:4-8

There are five significant interpretations of Hebrews 6:4-8: "(1) the Loss of Salvation view, [which is the classical Arminian view]; (2) the Hypothetical view; (3) the Tests of Genuineness view, [which is the classical Reformed View]; (4) The Means of Salvation view, which is the variation of the Tests of Genuineness view; (5) The Loss of Rewards view."² Dr. McKnight also purposes the covenant-community view, which emphasizes the warning is not about the rejection by God of individual but "local covenant community when that community as a

¹ D. A. Carson, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Epub ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2009), 615. Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

² Allen, *Hebrews*, 370-77.



whole turns away from God's will."¹ The covenant-community view emphasizes the warning to the community but risks overlooking individual responsibility. The classical Arminian view believes that a true believer can lose salvation, while Calvinists distinguish between the elect and the reprobate.² The Reformed view believes both the elect and the reprobate can taste God's salvation, but the apostate to whom Hebrews refers is not a true believer but the reprobate.

The Hypothetical view originates from the conditional translation "if they have fallen away" (παραπεσόντας), which I have discussed above that the participle should be considered as adjectivally rather than adverbially according to the immediate context. Therefore, the conditional "if" cannot be sustained with the substantival use of παραπεσόντας. The Hypothetical view also weakens these warnings because warnings are only hypothetical and do not necessarily happen. The Means of Salvation view argues that the warning passages are future-oriented. "God preserves Christians by means of warning and conditional promises."³ The Loss of Rewards view holds that the apostates point to the true believers. However, they will not lose their salvation or perish forever but lose their reward at the judgment seat of Christ. The Loss of Rewards view weakens the warning, which makes people feel that the apostate will only lose something rather than the entire life.

Each of the five different views has its strengths and weaknesses, but their main focus is on two issues: "who are the apostates that have fallen away (παραπεσόντας)?" "why/how is it impossible to repent?" This is also the most crucial controversy between Calvinism and Arminianism. First, who are the

¹ Scot McKnight, "The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions," *Trinity Journal* 13.1 (1992): 25.

² Derek Cooper, "Reformation Responses to Novatianism: 16th-Century Interpretations of Hebrews 6:4-6," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3.2 (2009): 277.

³ Allen, *Hebrews*, 373.



apostates? Only the Arminian view believes the apostates are genuine believers who could lose their salvation. The other views consider them unbelievers, meaning true believers never apostatize. As we have discussed in the background, the major readers would be converts from Judaism. They may have experienced heavenly gifts, but they did not possess salvation.¹ In other words, these people appear to have the Christian experience but are not true believers.

I think the different perceptions of apostates stem from different perspectives. Arminian views the phenomenon of the believer from the perspective of man, while Calvinism views the nature of the believer from the perspective of God. However, from a pastoral perspective, no one can judge whether one is a truly saved believer or not; only God can judge. We cannot judge one's salvation in place of God, and I think this is why the author of Hebrews deliberately leaves out the identity of the apostate. The author does not want us to struggle with whether or not the apostate is a true believer. Instead, the reader should examine whether or not the faith has been kept. Therefore, logically speaking, an apostate is certainly not a true believer, but practically speaking, we cannot judge whether an apostate is a true believer or not.

All the theologians agree that the fallen away *παραπεσόντας* are apostates, but how can they not repent? Do true believers lose their salvation? Repentance is impossible because these apostates have abandoned the only way to

¹ Owen mentions four reasons that these apostates are not true believers. First, there is no mention of faith or belief. Second, there is no mention of the special relationship between the apostates and Christ, such as "calling, new birth, justification, sanctification, union with Christ, adoption, or any other characteristic note of true believers" Third, the apostates only bear thorns and thistles which manifests that they are not true believers; because true believers will bear good fruit. Fourth, the author addressed the true believers as "beloved"(verse 9). See the discussion by Logan Ford, "A Needful, Wholesome Commination': Doctrine and Practice in John Owen's Exegesis of Hebrews 6:4-6," *Presbyterian* 47.1 (2021): 145-46.



salvation.¹ This is the same as the Israelites who fell into the wilderness. They fell away because they rejected God's sovereignty and salvation, refused to worship Him, and ultimately lost their only way to salvation.² The Qumran community also believes that one cannot repent because of a "hardened heart" (1QS 2:25-3:8), so the emphasis in this warning passage is not on whether God's salvation will be lost but instead on one's response to God's grace.³ This is the same principle as the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit can never be forgiven (Matthew 12:31; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10). Why is God unable to forgive the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? For the Holy Spirit applies salvation to individuals, and those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit prove that they do not yet have salvation. Therefore, just as a person who fears that he will commit blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not blaspheme the Holy Spirit, so one who fears that he will lose his salvation will not become an apostate.

This warning passage encourages the reader to enter into spiritual maturity (Hebrews 6:1). Since the church is still in God's "already but not yet" kingdom, believers will struggle and fall back in times of persecution and suffering. Apostates can be unrepentant and turn away from the faith, causing great harm to the church. The warning passage declares that those who do not repent will perish. It is consistent with pastoral experience as well. Those who feel it is okay to sin rarely return once they have left the faith.⁴ Even so, we cannot assume that

¹ Guthrie argues that according to verse 6 (they are recrucifying the Son of God and put him to open shame), "repentance has been (and is) ruled out because the fallen one are rejecting Christ ."George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 220.

² Richard D. Phillips, *Hebrews*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, N.J: P&R Pub., 2006), 191-92.

³ Alan C. Mitchell, *Hebrews*, Sacra Pagina Series ; v. 13 (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2007), 124.

⁴ Mary Healy, *Hebrews*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker



any individual will perish forever, for only God can judge the ultimate state of a person's salvation. Remember that the visible church includes both genuine believers (invisible church) and false believers. Our concern is not whether these people were true believers from the beginning but how we can persevere in our faith to the end.

The covenant of the OT is an essential context for the letter to the Hebrews. From a covenantal theological perspective, Israel in the OT entered into God's covenant through circumcision, and believers in the NT joined the church through baptism into the new covenant made by Jesus. However, "a person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical" (Romans 2:28). Likewise, not all believers in the NT churches are genuine.¹ Although not all of Israel in the OT were faithful Jews, these people were still to keep the covenant God had made with Israel, and they were to be blessed when they kept the covenant and bear the curse when they broke it. For as long as one is in the covenant, whether one is a genuine believer or not, they both have the same privilege to receive blessings and discipline.

The church community of the NT is also similar in that although those who enter the visible church are not necessarily genuine believers, all are required to keep the new covenant established by Christ. Those who apostatize the covenant will suffer a more severe punishment (Hebrews 10:29). I think this is the importance of the warning passages in Hebrews, which is for each individual in the church to figure out their obligations in the NT community. Do the prophetic warning passages ask what will happen if we are already in God's covenant and then break it? In other words, apostates in the covenant can also be blessed by the covenant, as mentioned in Hebrews 6:4-5. It is only because we cannot determine who is an apostate that there is a need for the warning.

Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 121-22.

¹ See the Parable of the Weeds in Matthew 13:24-30.



The Scripture has always emphasized the parallel of faith and works, for faith without works is dead (James 1:26). This also proves that we cannot confirm one's salvation but can only tell the inner faith by the outer works. The fruits of people's lives reveal the status and direction of their lives because "by their fruit, you will recognize them" (Matthew 7:16). Therefore, we need to "produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8). As with the prophets in the OT, the purpose of the warning was to motivate repentance. When we keep the covenant, we will repent and bear the fruit of good works. As we apply this warning passage, we must do so with gentleness and a redemptive attitude rather than making the final judgment from God's perspective. The encouragement of the Christian community to each other becomes an essential motivation for Christians to endure to the end.

CONCLUSION

Hebrews 5:11-6:12 is the core of the five "warning passages" that encourage believers to keep the faith and to study and follow Jesus throughout their lives.¹ The passage's structure also expects the reader to receive the grace of God.² This severe warning in Hebrews 6:4-8 assumes that apostasy is possible for anyone because, from the human perspective, we cannot tell who is ultimately saved. The author of Hebrews encourages believers from a pastoral perspective to hold on to their faith and follow the Lord. It is important to remember that believers at that time were always in danger of falling back in the face of persecution. The author mimics the warning pattern of the prophets, which is to warn Israel that if they do not repent, they will perish. Similarly, the

¹ See the chiasmic structure of the five warning passages by Bateman and Cockerill, *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, 84.

² Ronaldo Guzman and Michael W Martin, "Is Hebrew 5:11-6:20 Really a Disgression?," *Novum Testamentum* 57.3 (2015): 310.



author of Hebrews delivers a prophetic warning, emphasizing that those who apostatize will ultimately face the judgment of God.

For the apostates, on the one hand, we cannot judge who is an absolute apostate or who is truly saved, because that decision is up to God. All we can do is warning, not judging. On the other hand, God's warning is not only judgment but also grace. This is similar to the prophets' warnings, where the prophets did not expect Israel to perish but hoped they would repent. Davis paraphrased this warning passage in a very understandable way:

"I want to teach you about this more mature understanding of Jesus, but you are unwilling to learn of it. You need someone to teach you the elementary things, but the teaching I want to give you is for the mature. Therefore, I will move on to this mature teaching since if you turn away from God, I cannot make you right with him by constantly going over the elementary things. If you turn away, you must come back."¹

As in Matthew 18:17, we shall cast out the unrepentant from the church and see him as a Gentile and a tax collector. However, treating them like Gentiles and tax collectors does not mean they are cut off from the grace of God. God was expecting the church to re-evangelize them and hoped they would repent. Do not forget that Jesus was called the friend of sinners and tax collectors. Let us also treat these apostates as friends and encourage them to repent and return to the family of God.

¹ Casey Wayne Davis, "Hebrews 6:4-6 from an Oral Critical Perspective," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51.4 (2008): 767.



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