

# Appendix: Some Further Reflections on Hebrews 6

## HEBREWS

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by Ray C. Stedman

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Can spiritual life be lost once it has been received? That is a question which has divided Christians for centuries. An imposing list of scriptural references can be made to support either a yes or a no. But both cannot be right---unless the problem is our limited understanding of God's process of salvation! Perhaps our situation is not unlike that of the five blind men in Aesop's fable who each took hold of a different part of an elephant and insisted the whole must be similar to only the part they could feel. Let us take another tack and see if it helps to understand the issue.

Scripture frequently uses the analogy of physical birth and growth to picture spiritual birth and growth. We have an example in Hebrews 5, where immature Christians are likened to infants who need milk and not strong meat. If the spiritual life follows the same pattern as physical life, is it not possible that there is a spiritual gestation period between conception and birth? Is there not a time when new Christians are more like embryos, growing little by little in the womb, fed by the faith and vitality of others, just as a fetus lives by its mother's blood and sustenance?

Certainly we have all observed people who seemingly started well in the Christian life, blossomed and grew rapidly as new Christians, and yet, after a while, lost their spiritual vigor and faded away, sometimes into outright apostasy. This, of course, is just what the Lord predicted in the parable of the sower. "Some seed," he says, "fell on rocky places where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly . . . but when the sun came up, the plants were scorched and withered because they had no root." But the point is: *they did spring up!* There was life, but it could not bear the hot sun. As Jesus interpreted the parable: "The seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy, but since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away." Not having a root would correspond to the spiritual condition of not having any personal faith of his own. He lived for a while only on the faith (root) of others.

Again we must ask, What was the life that brought that initial experience of joy? Was it Spirit-given, or was it only a psychological response, coming from within the person alone? We probably cannot answer that question with any certainty. A similar case exists with the seed that fell among thorns and sprang up, only to be choked by the weeds which Jesus said were "the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth." These two examples raise the possibility that there is Spirit-given life which is real and viable, but depends on proper care to come to fruitbearing potential. It is only when it bears fruit that it can be called genuine grain, and it may be lost before it reaches that stage. Certainly Jesus said of the seed fallen in good soil that "it produces a crop." Viewing the parable in this light would make it almost a parallel to the situation in Hebrews 6.

But let us return to the metaphor of birth. Do we confuse conception with birth? A fetus may grow in the womb, fed by its mother's strength, but is that equivalent to birth? Of course not! Birth involves a break with the mother's life and the beginning of an independent existence that is peculiarly the infant's own. A newborn human may die after birth, even as everyone certainly will die in the normal course of events. But here the parallel with the spiritual must be altered, for many promises of Scripture powerfully assert that once born into the Father's family there is no way to lose that life! "I give unto them eternal life" says Jesus, "and they shall never perish!"

There is at least a hint of a prebirth spiritual gestation period in the promise of John 1:12 "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, *he gave the right to become children of God* ---children . . .

born of God." Here a "becoming" process is mentioned. This may be what Paul means when he writes to the Galatians, "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (Gal 4:19). The critical question then becomes, When does an individual's faith become truly his own? Is he or she living off the faith of others, drawing true spiritual grace and life from them? This often seems the case with children raised in a Christian family. Their faith, which seems real enough as they are growing, is not yet their own. Only when they leave the family circle and are faced with the necessity of surviving in a hostile world do they either come to personal faith themselves or, sadly, abandon all pretense of faith and lose themselves in the world's unbelief.

The situation seems to be that borrowed faith, though real enough at the time to produce many signs of spiritual vitality, can be lost. Others, observing this, draw the conclusion that eternal life, once held, can be lost again. Theologians call that *Arminianism*, after a Dutch theologian named Arminius who held this view. Certain Scriptures seem to support it. But once faith truly becomes personal, it can never be lost, though it may waver and grow very weak at times. That is the conclusion of Calvinists. But who can really tell the difference? Only the Lord can! We must leave the matter then at that point, as Paul does in his letter to Timothy: "God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and 'Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness'" (2 Tim 2:19). God reads the hearts and knows whether the faith being exhibited is borrowed faith or genuine; it is only when that inward faith affects the outward life and the believer "turns away from wickedness" that we can tell it is genuine faith.

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- [Text of Hebrews: New International Version](#)
  - [Bibliography](#)

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