

Robert Murray M'Cheyne:

THERE CAN BE NO DOUBT, dear friends that this is one of the most difficult passages in the Word of God. It has a depth in which an elephant may swim. Many have stumbled over it to their own destruction. Pray unfeignedly that we may be kept from erring in speaking from it.

There are two principle interpretations of these words which I would consider.

There are some divines who believe professors are here spoken of.

They who, live the foolish virgins, have lamps and a wick, but no oil in their vessels. They who come a far way to Christ, but who do not come altogether.

I would humbly offer you three reasons why I think that this is not the right interpretation of these words.

First, it is said, they are enlightened, that they have tasted of the heavenly gift; that is, Christ, and the powers of the world to come. Now it appears to me that this is the mark of a true believer; a true believer has no more than this.

But I have a second objection. I do not believe that mere professors falling away cannot be renewed by repentance. You remember Simon Magus: he fell away in shameful apostasy, but what did the apostle Peter say to him? 'Repent, therefore, of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thy heart may be forgiven thee' (Acts 8:22). The same thing is true of Manasseh, there is little doubt but that he was a professor. He was brought up under the care of his godly father Hezekiah, but he fell away into shameful apostasy, and set up a carved image in the holiest of all, and made his children pass through the fire to Moloch. Yet he was brought to repentance.

But I have a third objection. It is said. '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.' That is, it is impossible to bring them back to saving repentance. Now this shows that they were there before. For these three reasons I feel obliged to give up this interpretation.

I will now give you the second interpretation which divines put upon these words. It is that Paul is supposing a case, a case that will never happen.

Suppose 'they who were once enlightened', etc., I believe, dear friends, for the sake of warning sluggish Hebrews, and for the sake of warning you, Paul wrote these dreadful words.

Let us now go over the description here given of a true believer.

They are enlightened. The first thing that the Holy Spirit does when he is converting a soul is to give light: 'Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord' (Ephesians 5:8). He pours a flood of light into the unconverted soul, so that it sees itself. The first thing that the Holy Spirit does, is to give knowledge to let us see things as they are - heaven as it is - hell as it is. This light, brethren, too, is sanctifying light. 'Beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, we are changed into the same image, from glory to glory' (2 Corinthians 3:18). And this is saving light: 'For this is life eternal, to know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent' (John 17:3). You remember when Paul was converted, there were scales that fell from his eyes, and he was enabled to see (Acts 9:18). Now this is just intended to show us what conversion is - it is as scales falling the eyes - it is the giving of sight to the blind.

I would now put this question to you, Have you been enlightened? Can you say with the blind man, 'Once I was blind but now I see' (John 9:25)? Have you seen the wonder of this plan of salvation of Christ? On the answer of that question rests your conversion. Sometimes when a child has been awakened in a family, and begins to pray, they often ask, What fancy is this? Dear friends, it is no fancy. Such a one now sees that there is a hell - there is a heaven - that conversion is something real. It is no mere fancy that a man may take up at pleasure. It is divine. Would to God that ye all knew it, for then ye would see that it is no fancy.

I come now to the second part of the description: 'And have tasted of the heavenly gift', The heavenly gift is the gift of God. Is the same that is spoken of in John 1:14; 'The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.' Paul calls it the 'unspeakable gift' - 'Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift.' (2 Corinthians 9:15). In these words it is called

the 'heavenly gift'. I suppose it is called the heavenly gift in allusion to the manna that came down from heaven. And that to taste of the heavenly gift, I think, means to have a real experience of Christ. Those who would interpret the words as referring to professors, say that it means 'slightly to taste'; but this is not the meaning of these words: they mean to have a real experience of Christ. It is said in the Hebrews 2:9: 'He tasted death for every man.' Again, in the Psalm 34:8" 'O taste and see that the LORD is good.' That is to have a real experience of God's goodness. Have you then tasted of the heavenly gift? You know he would have been foolish Israelite, who gathered in manna in the morning and ground it and made it into cakes, but he never tasted of it .

They are 'made partakers of the Holy Ghost.' When a soul tastes the heavenly gift, then it is made a partaker of the Holy Ghost. And observe the word 'partakers.' It means sharers alike - sharers with all that are believers. And not only so, but ye are partakers also with Christ; for the Holy Ghost that dwells in Christ dwells in the believer. And you are partakers with God: 'For if sons then heirs, heirs of God, and joint heirs with Jesus Christ' (Romans 8:17). Do you, O believer, feel anything of this? You that hate believers know nothing of this. And remember, brethren, you that are not receivers of the Holy Ghost, are none of his. You may have the name! You may have the shell! You may have the outward form! But you know him not.

But again, 'they have tasted the good word of God.' I believe this just means the Word of God - the Word which God has given us. It is what is spoken of in Isaiah 52:7: 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace...' It is the same word as spoken of in Isaiah 50:4: 'The Lord GOD hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary.' It is the same the angels spoke of when they appeared to the shepherds of Bethlehem, 'Fear not; for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord' (Luke 2:10-11). This is the word of God: and to taste the word of God is to relish it - to relish it as you do your necessary food. How many taste it not! How many look around to the clock, and say, When will it be done? Ah! You have not tasted the good Word of God; and why is this? It is because you know not Christ - it is because you are on the way to hell.

They live under 'the power of the world to come'. The unconverted live under the power of this world - under the power of money - under the power of fame. Unconverted men live under the power of these things; but converted souls live under the power of the world to come: their anchor is within the veil. How is it with you? Do you live in the sight of an eternal heaven or an eternal hell? My dear brethren, there is a world to come. There is a world to come, whether you believe it or not. There is but a step between you and it. Many do not believe that there is a world to come. You that are Sabbath breakers, you do not believe there is a world to come. You that sell what makes the drunkard drunken, you do not believe there is a world to come. You do not believe there is a hell, else you could not live as you do.

Now, dear friends I have but a moment to apply this to those whom Paul applied it to. And I would just state it simply to you, that I do not believe it is possible for a child of God to fall away and perish. They may fall, but they can never fall finally. They may fall as David did - They may fall as Abraham did - They may fall as Peter did, but they can never perish; for the faithfulness of God stands against it; the faithfulness of the Son stands against it - 'Lo, these are they which thou hast given me, and I have kept them and none of them is lost' (John 17:12); and the faithfulness of the Holy Spirit stands against it. Some then will ask: What is the use of these fearful words? They are to keep you from drawing back. Take an illustration: I believe that the angels can never fall, according to the passage in 1 Timothy 5:21; but they might look over the golden battlements of heaven to that place of torment, and say, 'If we had sinned, that would have been our portion.' Amen.