

MOVING ON TO MATURITY
*What Does Your Crop Look Like?*ⁱ
Hebrews 6:4-12

This past week I stumbled across some rumored notes from hospital charts. These were probably written by some sleepy intern or frazzled nurse.

- The patient refused autopsy.
- Patient has left white blood cells at another hospital.
- Note: Patient recovering from forehead cut. Patient became very angry when given an enema by mistake.
- Patient has chest pain if she lies on her left side for over a year.
- On the second day, the knee was better, and on the third day it disappeared.
- The patient has been depressed since she began seeing me in 1993.
- She is numb from her toes down.
- While in ER, she was examined, x-rated, and sent home.
- Patient was alert and unresponsive.
- Rectal examination revealed a normal size thyroid.
- She stated that she had been constipated for most of her life, until she got a divorce.
- I saw your patient today, who is still under our care for physical therapy.
- The lab test indicated abnormal liver function.
- Patient has two teenage children, but no other abnormalities.ⁱⁱ

We can laugh at the apparent contradictions in most of these statements. But when it comes to an apparent contradiction in the Bible, God's Word, we don't just laugh and blow it off. No, we want to try to understand the meaning of the passage and why it appears there's a contradiction.

That's the case with the passage we're looking at today in Hebrews 6:4-12. This passage is not contradictory in itself. But when read from a certain angle, it appears to contradict what we know about the eternal security of the believer as taught in many other passages in the Bible. For example, John says, "He who has the Son has life, but he who does not have the Son does not have life." (1 John 5:12). And Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:27-29). And Paul asks, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Romans 8:35). And his response is assuring: *Nothing* can separate us from Christ's love (8:38-39).

But how do you reconcile such statements with what we find here in Hebrews 6. Listen carefully as Tim and Beth read our passage for us today.

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned. Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of

better things in your case—things that accompany salvation. God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised. Hebrews 6:4-12

Last week we looked at the call to spiritual maturity. This passage deals more with the motivation to spiritual maturity. But in both the speaker uses imagery that his audience can identify with. Last week it was the image of an infant – dependent, lacking discipline, and not yet ready for solid food. But in this passage it's the image of a field that produces either a useful crop or a useless crop. In other words, the speaker moves from the nursery to the farm. This is what we find right in the heart of this passage in verses 7-8.

THE IMAGERY: A FIELD AND ITS CROP (7-8)

Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned. Hebrews 6:7-8

Living as we do in a very urban area, it's hard for us to grasp the full impact of this imagery. Most of us are not farmers. But I believe the imagery spoke very clearly and directly to these first century readers.ⁱⁱⁱ That's why Paul writes to the Corinthians saying, "You are God's field" (1 Corinthians 3:9).

What produces a useful crop? Some years ago, a study was done by an agricultural school in Iowa. It stated that production of hundred bushels of corn from one acre of land required 4,000,000 lbs. of water, 6,800 lbs. of oxygen, 5,200 lbs. of carbon, 160 lbs. of nitrogen, 125 lbs. of potassium, 75 lbs. of sulfur, and many other elements too numerous to list. Of course, the farmer's labor is also needed, but it was estimated that only 5% of the produce of the farm could be attributed to human effort.^{iv} Little wonder that in the same passage where Paul says to the Corinthians, "You are God's field," he also says, "God causes the growth."

In this case, God provides all that is necessary for a great harvest. The conditions are right. The 4,000,000 lbs of water are provided. And I have no doubt that the speaker was thinking of you and me here in Portland when he says, "Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it..."! What he is saying is this: God abundantly provides the conditions necessary for our spiritual growth. We could describe this provision as the "water" of God's Spirit, the "oxygen" of God's Word, and the "carbon, nitrogen, and potassium" of opportunities to put into practice what we have heart. But none of this will have the desired effect if it falls on deaf ears and dull hearts.

In this image of the field, the land that produces a useful crop and the land that produces a useless crop is one and the same. And this land, this field is an image of you and me *as believers*. The conditions are also the same. There's plenty of rain and nourishment. What's the difference then? The response of the land.^v That's why the Word of God can be given to a congregation like this, and in the end some will take what is heard and it will produce a rich spiritual harvest and others will walk out of here and produce nothing but thorns and thistles. Why? The "rain" is the same; the conditions are the same; but the heart response is different.

On the one hand, the land that drinks in the rain and produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed represents those believers who press on to maturity and receive the blessing of God as a result. Not only do they receive blessing, but others are blessed through them. Verse 7 says that the crop they produce is “useful for whom it is farmed.”

On the other hand, the crop of “thorns and thistles” is worthless, in danger of being cursed, and will ultimately be burned. I understand that there are about 250 types of thorns and thistles that grew in Palestine at this period of time. And these thorns and thistles represent the many ways in which we express our spiritual infancy and lack of maturity: anger, bitterness, immorality, a complaining spirit, unforgiveness, spiritual laziness, forsaking the assembling of ourselves as believers, drifting from Christ, and doctrinal compromise. This is what believers who are stuck in spiritual infancy produce, due to their dullness of hearing, dependency on others for spiritual nourishment and lack of spiritual discipline.

Notice that the believer represented by the land that produces thorns and thistles is described in three ways. First, this land is “*worthless*.” This does not mean that the person (or church) represented by this kind of crop is an unbeliever. Paul uses the very same word in 1 Corinthians 9:27 when he describes what he does not want to be: “No, I beat my body” he says, “and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be *disqualified* for the prize.” The “land,” or the believer, that produces a worthless crop is not sent to hell, but is disqualified from receiving Christ’s rich reward for work well done.

Second, this land is described as “*in danger of being cursed*.” Often in the Old Testament, God’s blessing was the result of obedience and God’s curse was the result of disobedience.^{vi} The curses warned of were not eternal hell, but temporal, physical judgment. The believer of the Old Testament had before him the rewards of obedience and the curse of disobedience.

Lastly, this land that produces thorns and thistles is “*destined to be burned*.” Many think that the speaker is here referring to hell. But often in the Bible the imagery of burning is used to describe God’s judgment upon believers. The purpose of the fire is *not* to destroy the field, but the thorns and weeds in the field. Here the purpose of the fire is to eliminate both the seed and fruit of hardness of heart. Land is often burned to remove weeds and stubble. In France where we live among the vineyards and orchards, there were sometimes fires that would burn and cleanse the land, preparing it for cultivation and a rich harvest. This was also true at this time.^{vii} This burning is the discipline that God allows in the life of a believer as described in Hebrews 12:5-11), and not the fire of hell – the destiny of unbelievers. As believers, we will never be judged to determine our eternal destiny. That is settled by grace.^{viii} But, we will be judged for reward or the loss of reward. God’s judgment in our lives could include both temporal, physical discipline even by death^{ix} and / or the loss of future reward (Hebrews 10:26, 27, 30, 31).^x

This is exactly what Paul is talking about when he writes to the Corinthians these words:

You are God’s field, God’s building...If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. 1 Corinthians 3:9-15

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that it is a fearful thing to fall in to the hands of the living God (10:31-32). What about you? Will you be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames? This passage is not here for you to judge others, but for you to judge yourself. What does your “crop” look like? Is it useful or useless?

A USELESS HARVEST (6:4-6)

With the imagery of verses 7-8 in mind, we can now better understand verses 4-6 which describe the useless crop or harvest. These verses have been so troubling to so many Christians down through the centuries. More than once a troubled believer has sat in my office and referred to these verses as proof positive that he / she was once saved, but since had fallen away and could now no longer be restored to God’s favor. Do these verses teach that you can “fall” from grace? .

Can that happen? Can that happen to you? Let’s look at what the speaker is saying. First, he says that something is “impossible.” There’s a close connection between these verses and what we saw last week. The final thought of the previous passage is that something is *possible* – it is possible to move on to maturity! Verse 3 says: “And God permitting, we will do so!”

But now the speaker tells us about something that is impossible. “It is impossible for those who have...” There are some cases where it is “impossible” to see a turnaround, putting a believer back on the pathway towards maturity. But get this – *the turnaround is not from hell to heaven, but from immaturity to maturity, from a useless harvest to a useful harvest.*

For whom is this turnaround impossible? It is clear that the speaker is talking here about believers, not unbelievers. Notice how he describes them. First, *they are converted*. They have been “enlightened” (6:4). This is a common expression referring to the conversion experience. In fact, in Hebrews 10:32 he uses this same word when he says, “Remember those earlier days, after *you had received the light*, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering.”^{xi}

Being converted, they had also *received the gift of eternal life*. He says they “have tasted of the heavenly gift” (6:4b). The “heavenly gift” is eternal life. Paul says, “The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23). To “taste” means to come to know something through personal experience. There’s a lot of difference between seeing or hearing about something and tasting something. Each Tuesday I hear about the good cookies that are available from our Tuesday morning Bible study. And when they bring them down to the church offices, I have a chance to see them. But it’s when I taste them that they become part of me. And so here, eternal life had become part of the experience of these believers.^{xii}

They had also been made *sharers of the Holy Spirit along with all Christians*. They were “partakers of the Holy Spirit” (6:4c). Paul uses the same idea in 1 Corinthians 12:13 when he says that all believers had been made to “drink of one Spirit.”^{xiii}

Fourthly, these believers had initially *received the Word of God for growth*: “tasted the good word of God...” (6:5a). And lastly, they had not only experienced the person and presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives, but also the power *of the Holy Spirit*. They had “tasted...the power of the age to come” (6:5b).^{xiv}

All of these characteristics describe, without a doubt, a genuine believer. All of these characteristics describe the “plentiful rainfall” that comes upon the land in verse 7. But—and here’s the caveat – some have “fallen away” (6a). What does this mean? It doesn’t mean that they have lost their salvation. Remember, we’re not dealing with heaven and hell here. We’re talking about immaturity or maturity. In light of what we’ve already seen in this book, it means that some were drifting (2:1-4), some were stuck in spiritual infancy (5:11 – 6:3), some were forsaking the assembling of themselves together (10:25), and some were becoming spiritually dull of hearing (5:11). In other words, for you and me, if any of these things characterize our Christian life – deadness, dullness, drifting or disassociating ourselves from the worshipping community – then we are in danger of being those described in these verses! We too can “fall away!”

What makes matters worse is described in the next phrase. He says, “It is impossible (for these kinds of believers) to be brought back to repentance.” A better translation is in the active sense: ‘It is impossible to renew these kinds of Christians to repentance.’ He does *not* say that they cannot be brought back to salvation, but to repentance. Repentance is a very important aspect of the Christian life. And here he’s talking about repentance of the “thorns and thistles” in our lives produced by hardness of heart.

We could ask, “*Who* can’t renew them to repentance?” Certainly God can! But the speaker doesn’t seem to be referring to God here, but rather to the believers who are *not* dead, dull, drifting and disassociating themselves from the fellowship of believers. Remember, we *can* move on to maturity as God enables (verse 3). But we cannot always bring back believers who have chosen to drift away, both from God and the church (verse 6). In other words, if a fellow Christian has come to the point of “falling away” as described in these verses, it is really impossible, through mutual exhortation, to bring them back. One very simple reason this is the case is that they have disassociated themselves from other believers who can speak into their lives.^{xv} They can only face the judgment of God in their lives.^{xvi}

Why? The writer tells us the reason in the next phrase: “because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace” (6:6b). What does that mean? It’s helpful to understand that, among those to whom this book was originally written, there were some who were disassociating with the company of believers and realigning themselves with a sect of Judaism. And in doing this, these believers are taking their stand among those who had crucified Jesus Christ in the first place. This results in bringing Christ public disgrace.

I doubt that anyone here this morning is facing the exact circumstances as these early believers. But we face similar temptations. We too can begin to drift, become dull of hearing, and disassociate ourselves from the weekly gathering of believers. But this is the pathway of spiritual infancy. This is the field that brings produces thorns and thistles. And when continued in, we can reach such a state of spiritual dullness and hardness that we too are beyond being restored to repentance.

That’s the picture of a worthless harvest. Believer, don’t go there! That’s the pathway of God’s judgment and discipline in your life. In the end, you will be saved, but so as by fire! But now the speaker gives us a much more positive picture of a useful harvest. This is found in verses 9-12.

A USEFULL HARVEST (6:9-12)

I'm not going to say much about these verses today. We'll come back to this passage week after next and look at it more in depth. Let me just read to you verse 9 and make a couple of comments related to the life of our church.

Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation.

At half-time a football coach will rake his team over the coals for their fumbles and blunders during the first half of the game. But then, after yelling and reprimanding, and just before sending them out for the second half, he'll give them some words of encouragement. He knows they can do better. I think that's what the writer to the Hebrews is doing here. He severely warns them in verses 1-8. But now he offers some encouragement in verses 9-12. In a sense, he tells them to pick up where they are and go on to win.

To do that, however, you have to know what the “score” is at present. You have to face the reality of where you are and what you have to contend against. What about our case at Central Bible Church? Are there some “thorns and thistles” in our lives that should not accompany salvation?

Yes, I believe there are. And here I'm stepping out on a limb to give a few pastoral remarks concerning our congregation. First, I believe that there is some anger and bitterness among some. Hebrews 12:15 says this: “See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.” In an intergenerational church like this, there is always the tendency for those who are older to grow angry that things are not like they used to be. And for the younger generation, there is the temptation to be angry that things are not what they would like them to be...maybe like the most cutting-edge church in town full of 18-30 year olds where most everyone thinks alike, dresses alike and listens to the same music on their ipod. And over time, these feelings can develop into a “root of bitterness.” Unfortunately, this root of bitterness can lead to another sin that these Hebrew Christians were struggling with – the sin of forsaking the weekly assembly of believers (Hebrews 10:25). When Christians grow angry or bitter, they begin to pull away. And when you pull away from the weekly gathering of the church, that is often the first step towards hardness of heart. A root of bitterness will bring about a crop of thorns and thistles that can quickly take over an entire field...even an entire church.

The next verse in Hebrews 12 mentions another area that must be dealt with in the life of our church. “See to it that no one is sexually immoral...” (Hebrews 12:16). Some of us are living with open sexual sin in our lives. And some of us are living with private sexual sin in our lives. Don't go down that path. If you continue, you will reach a point of no return.

For either of these areas – bitterness or sexual immorality – will you repent today? Or maybe God is speaking to you about another area of your life, an area of “thorns and thistles” where you are stuck in spiritual infancy. Will you repent of that right now? Turn around; embrace the grace of God in your life. He forgives so freely. He heals so readily.

Can you identify with this prayer? I will pray in the collective sense – for us as a church. Can you personally identify with this prayer?

Father, as we continue as a church in this season of seeking, we acknowledge our sin. We recognize our tendency to grow hard of heart. We desire to grow a useful crop that is a blessing to many. Forgive us for those areas of our church life and individual lives where our crop is characterized by thorns and thistles. Forgive us, dear God, for any spirit of bitterness. Forgive us, dear God, for neglecting the weekly gathering of believers. Forgive us, dear God, for any immorality that is present among us. We thank you for your great grace and awesome love that is more than ready to forgive, restore and heal. Amen

If you can personally, individually identify with that prayer, would you join me here in the middle of this auditorium? You may want to kneel in repentance. You may want to come, not only on your own behalf, but also on behalf of our church family. When there is sin in the camp, we are all responsible.

O to grace, how great a debtor, daily I'm constrained to be!
Let thy goodness like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee:
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart or take and seal it; seal it for thy courts above.

ⁱ Idea: The reason we should press on to maturity is because God blesses those who do so, but severely disciplines those who fall away. Applicational objective: See our people motivated to press on to maturity resulting in present blessing and future reward.

ⁱⁱ Submitted to www.preachingtoday.com by Marshall Shelley, editor, Leadership Journal.

ⁱⁱⁱ It's not uncommon for the Bible to compare believers, or even all who hear God's Word, to a field. Jesus gave us the well-known parable of the soils, in which only one type of soil received the Word of God and produced a rich harvest (Matthew 13). And Paul writes to the Corinthian believers and says, "You are God's field" (1 Corinthians 3:9-15).

^{iv} *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, ed. Michael Green (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), 355-56.

^v What we have here is one land but with two different crops. One is a crop of blessing; the other is a crop of cursing. But it's the same land that produces one or the other. The crops are different, but the land is the same. Why do I say this? Because the land speaks of the believer, or the community of believers, the church. The point is this: a believer (or even a church) can produce either a useful crop or a worthless crop. But in either case, it's produced by a Christian, a believer. And not only is the land the same, so are the conditions. Both the land that produces a useful crop and the land that produces a worthless crop receive the rain that is often falling on it. Now don't you think that the speaker, in saying this, had us Portlanders in mind? I'm sure he did!

^{vi} Deuteronomy 28: 2 "All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God: You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock--the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out."

^{vii} The historian Pliny (ca. A.D. 112) speaks of land that was burned to remove the weeds and stubble: Elder Pliny *Historia Naturalis* XVII 300.72 as cited by Thomas Kem Oberholtzer, "The Thorn-Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4-12" in *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July-September, 1988), 326.

^{viii} Ephesians 2:8-10; Titus 3:3-7; John 5:19-29; 2 Corinthians. 5:17; 1 John 5:13.

^{ix} 1 Corinthians 11:30; 1 John 5:16-17.

^x 2 Corinthians 5:5-10; 1 Timothy 1:20; Romans 14:10-12.

^{xi} We also find the same expression in 2 Corinthians 4:6 “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ *made his light shine in our hearts* to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

^{xii} The same word is used in Hebrews 2:9 where Jesus “tasted” of death. He really experienced death. And these believers had really come to know eternal life.

^{xiii} The same word is used in Hebrews 3:1 “Therefore, holy brothers, who *share* in the heavenly calling...” Cf. 3:14.

^{xiv} These miraculous signs were a foreshadowing of the coming age as described in Hebrews 2:4.

^{xv} Cf. Hebrews 3:13; 10:23-25.

^{xvi} Cf. Hebrews 2:3 “How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?”