
The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

The Consequences of Falling Away Hebrews 10:26-31

Let us begin by reading the text of Hebrews 10:26-31 -

26 For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES. 28 Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29 How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE." 31 It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

This morning our journey through the book of Hebrews brings us to one of the most grave and sobering of subjects. It is a subject that brings no joy or delight and yet, by the providence of God, He has placed this text before us to serve as a warning. Our passage is an abrupt stop in the opening salvo of the practical applications presented in Hebrews 10:19-25 calling us to draw near to God, to hold fast the confession of our hope and to stimulate one another on to love and good deeds. This warning is placed just before the final exhortations or applications of this chapter which include a call to continue in Christ, regardless of persecutions or difficulties, reflecting upon the former workings of God in these believers' lives.

This grave and sober subject of which our text speaks is not new to us or the original readers. We were first introduced to this topic back in Hebrews 3:12 (if you would turn there) where we read:

Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.

We were next educated in this matter a few chapters further in Hebrews 6:4-6 where we read:

4 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, 5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to

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repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.

There are two phases that these passages have in common and those are “falls away” and “have fallen away”. These serve as simple definitions of the topic of our passage this morning and that topic is “apostasy” – which means, in the case of Hebrews 3:12, “to remove or revolt against” and in Hebrews 6:6 means “to fall aside or away.” As we come to Hebrews 10:26-31, we don’t see either one of these words used, but the picture of who is and what happens to the one who revolts against and ultimately falls away from God is clear and graphic.

Let me remind you that the author is speaking to a congregation, an assembly of people who, at some level or another, have made a profession of Jesus Christ. Having been exposed to the knowledge and wonder of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the payment and proof for the forgiveness of sins, some in this congregation had confessed this truth publicly and outwardly, but, as we come to see in our text as well as know even by experience, an outward profession is not any guarantee of the inward reality of salvation. This then is how I wish to address this topic of apostasy with you, calling you to watch for the warning signs in both your own life as well as in the lives of your brothers and sisters in Christ. For, as we see in our text, there is no more horrific place to be than in the hands of the living God awaiting the wrath of His judgment. How do we identify and thereby avoid the consequences of the apostate? It would be my prayer that, in the words of Colossians 1:28, we would proclaim Christ, *“admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.”* To that end, I offer you the following four considerations.

I. The Problem of the Apostate (10:26a)

We begin by identifying the problem of the apostate. If we are to take care that none of us has a sinful, unbelieving heart, we must have some idea of how such a heart reveals itself and we see this in this opening line of Hebrews 10:26 – *“For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth...”* I want to be absolutely clear here so as not to cause a misplaced sense of guilt. The author is not speaking here of some intermittent or ignorance based sin. This is not a condemnation upon the everyday battle the believer does against sin. What is spoken of here is far more intense, and far more sinister. As the first readers heard these words, it was to be the alarm for those within the

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congregation who had grown cold to the gospel, arrogant to the truth and apathetic toward the church. This is a call to consider if a person's life was based more upon ritualism and routine than in a vital and continual dependence upon the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. As we unpack this first phrase, please know that the author is not addressing some weak believers who had been tripped up in their walk with Christ, but rather those, some who were evidently still present in the congregation to some degree or another, whose hearts had purposely revolted, rejected and had fallen away from genuine faith in Christ. In other words, there were those who claimed to be Christians and yet rejected the very sufficiency of Christ. Some, as we read in Hebrews 10:25, had already completely forsaken the church, yet there were others that needed to hear this warning, that they must repent before they take that final step and fall away not only from the church, but from the living God.

So then, just what is the problem of the apostate? The problem of the apostate is that after receiving the full and complete knowledge of the truth, the truth of his own sin, of Christ's perfection and righteousness, of the sufficiency and scope of the death of Christ for the forgiveness of sins, he says in his heart and eventually through his behavior, that the life and death of Christ as his example and his expiation for sin is not satisfying. He does not care what Christ has done for him, and so determines to deliberately renounce and reject following Christ in order to follow his own way of living for God. Such apostasy has been explained as "the deliberate act of a professing Christian who knowingly and deliberately rejects revealed truth regarding the deity of Jesus Christ, redemption through His atoning sacrifice, or any part of the doctrines related to salvation."

The problem of the apostate is that having once moved toward the full knowledge of the truth as found in the person of Jesus Christ, he is now determined to move away from that truth, to even twist and mock the truth. I know that there may be some in this place who are fearful that they have done this; that while you are physically present here, your heart has fallen away from God. Let me point out the use of the word "**willingly**" in our text. This is no slip up in one's walk. This is no momentary lapse in good judgment that simply needs to be confessed and repented of. No, this is a purposeful and calculated determination to reject various aspects of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And when this takes hold of a heart, such a person is literally just moments away from fully walking away from Christ.

So, is this attitude present in this congregation today? It could be. A dreadful thought to consider that some in here might be on the path to apostasy;

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that tomorrow, next week, next month, or even next year, one with whom you are standing beside in worship now will reject the Savior he once sang praises to. Hence the warnings; “see to it that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.” It would be my prayer that of all that are here, the worst thing we would have to consider this morning is that perhaps some are on this path to apostasy, but that none have fully embraced such a rejection. If there is still a concern in your heart and a desire to be forgiven by Christ, there is hope. The problem of the apostate is that he does not care about Christ or His church.

Let us beware, let us keep guard, and let us watch out for ourselves and for one another in this matter. This falling away, this end of willfully sinning by rejecting the person and work of Christ for you, is a process. It does not happen overnight. None could rightly say, “I woke up this morning and determined to reject Christ.” Other things will take place before this, one of which Hebrews 10:25 addressed, the forsaking, the failing to assemble together with the saints. Beloved, there may be many things, some seemingly good, others obviously bad, that will be used by the heart to justify neglect of the church, a failing to fellowship on a consistent basis with God’s people. So I ask you, what is it that moves you away from the opportunities of fellowship? How do you justify any non-participation with the saints? Will all such forsaking of the fellowship result in apostasy, of falling away from the living God. No, not necessarily, but may we be careful not to justify the participating in the very characteristic given to describe an apostate – a failure to regularly engage with the saints, and by this I mean more than simply rubbing shoulders on Sundays. For nearly two thousand years the church was central to the social lives of her people. Today, an honest appraisal would have to conclude that the church, for most is at best a peripheral and secondary part of people’s lives. Such an attitude is potentially the first step toward apostasy. Why is it that the 20 something crowd is leaving the church in groves? Because they have learned from their parents that church was secondary. They have seen the decline in their parents attending the formal and more social gatherings of the church and are simply taking it to the next level, that level being a falling away from the church. I beseech you parents, consider carefully what you have your children participate or not participate in concerning the church. Your own motives may be good, but be on guard that it does not teach them more than your intentions, that the people and activities of the church are secondary to ones own desires and intentions. I realize there is a careful balance to be kept here, but upon which side would it be best to err, the side of limited or non-participation with the body of Christ or on the side of greatly

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desiring and pursuing participation with the body of Christ? Let us be careful not to inadvertently introduce the attitude of the apostate into our lives.

II. The Prospect of the Apostate (10:26b-27)

Having considered the problem of the apostate, our text moves us to look now at the prospect of the apostate. Picking up at the end of verse 26 we read, *there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES*. When the sacrifice of Christ and fellowship with His people become dissatisfying to the heart, there is nothing left for such a person to look forward to but dying in his sins and thus facing the judgment of God. Our text says, **“there no longer “remains” [present tense – a continual condition] as sacrifice for sins.”** Since Jesus is the full and final remedy for sin, if a person has determined they don’t like or don’t want Jesus, such a person will remain in such a state and all that is left for them is this **“terrifying expectation of judgment.”** Beloved, the person describe here is gone, there is no bringing him back, at least humanly speaking. For the one who turns his back on Jesus and continually denies him, part of the judgment is that he will remain in this condition.

For this reason we ought to take careful heed to this warning. The prospect of turning such a one as this back to the LORD is not hopeful. Why would we wait to see anyone in this condition before we try to help them? The only prospect left if judgment. Part of the argument here then is not to call the apostates back to Christ, but to call those in the congregation to guard their hearts, each other’s hearts and their children’s hearts well from following such an example. Quoting from Isaiah 26:11, the pastoral author calls those who fall away “adversaries” who will be consumed in a wrath of fire. The purpose here is to bring a fear to those who might be toying with the path of the apostate. But the prospects are not good.

III. The Portrait of the Apostate (10:28-29)

So we have seen the problem of the apostate as well as the prospect of the apostate. Let us now turn our attention to what I have termed the portrait of the apostate in verses 28-29. We are offered a “before and after” or “from bad to worse” sort of picture in these verses. Let me explain this with a bit of levity (for this is heave stuff). Most of us have seen some kind of weight lose advertisement first showing the picture of the 250 pound man, belly protruding out over his pants and all, followed by the after picture of and 180 pound man, fit

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and trim. Well, the picture of verses 28-29 is just the opposite, showing us first, as it were, the 250 pound man and then the same man at 550 pounds. How is this so?

First, in verse 28, we are taken to the Old Testament and shown how rebellion against God was handled: “*Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.*” Referencing the principles of Deuteronomy 17:2-6 and 19:5, any kind of evil or blaspheming against God, if validate by two or three witnesses, resulted in what? Being stoned to death. In other words, such a person would die by decree of God, but by the hands of man. This is the “before” picture or portrait of the apostate in the Old Testament

Second then is the present portrait of the apostate, the one who has received the “knowledge of truth” concerning Christ and yet openly rejects it. It is interesting to note that all we are told about the punishment for the New Testament apostate is presented in the form of a question, “***How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve...***” (left to the imagination) I must say that I take no delight in any form of capitol punishment. But if given a choice, death by firing squad, or by means of a very sharp guillotine would be preferable to being stoned. What an awful way to die. What could be worse? Evidently there is something worse than punishment by means of the hands of men, and that, according to verse 31, is punishment by the hands of the living God.

But our before and after portrait is not done. The Old Testament apostate rejected the light of revelation given by God to that point, a revelation full enough to point people to their need of God to save, but not one that fully revealed Christ, the very means of salvation for all who believe. Therefore, we are offered three insights as to how much more dreadful is the New Testament apostate’s character. These relate back up to verse 26 and the problem of the apostate:

1. He disdains the divine Savior *who has trampled under foot the Son of God*

First, I would have you notice as we look at these three insights that total apostasy involved the rejection of each person of the Godhead, beginning here with a rejection of God the Father. Just as to accept Jesus is to accept the Father, to deny Jesus is deny the Father.

This is graphically illustrated by the phrase “***has trampled under foot the Son of God.***” In other words, the apostate takes that which God the Father has declared as most precious and beloved by Him, His very Son, and rather than seeing His worth, see Him as worthless and are willing not simply to walk over

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Him, but actually to violently strike down to the ground and stomp on. Anyone who has had an insect crawl on them may have a grasp on the idea here. Upon seeing such a creature, you may leap up, violently brush it off to the ground and then what – stomp it to death. It is a worthless, vile, disgusting little bug that must be destroyed. This is the attitude of the apostate – Christ is worthless, vile and disgusting and deserves nothing more from him than to be stomped into the ground.

2. He disregards divine Salvation

and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified

The second insight is that the apostate disregards divine salvation. Here we learn that such a person has no regard for the blood of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity. To **“regard as unclean the blood”** means to treat the blood of Christ as if it were nothing special, it was at best common and at worst profane. The apostate sees no benefit or blessing of the atonement of Christ, of forgiveness in Christ. There was a season by which the idea of forgiveness of sin kept this person from further sins, for a time. This is what is meant “by which he was sanctified.” The word sanctified means “set apart” and for a time the apostate was set apart from sin as he was in the fellowship of believers, but in time, he turned to the greatest sin of all, treating that which is ultimately holy as common or profane.

3. He disrespects the divine Spirit

and has insulted the Spirit of grace?

Finally, we see that the apostate disrespects the divine Spirit. This word “insulted” – means to violently disrespect or reproach. The idea here is similar to that incident in Matthew 12 where the Pharisees attributed the works of Christ to spirit or power of Beelzebul or Satan rather than to the Spirit of God. How do you suppose I might feel, or even you, as a congregation would feel, if after preaching to you the Word of God, someone came up to me, and with every intention of belittling me said in a loud voice, “You preached with the passion and fervor of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad?” To even suggest that a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, seeking to preach by the power of the Spirit of God, preached with the same spirit as Ahmadinejad would be disrespectful. How much more disrespectful is it to denounce, or belittle the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus as well as in the salvation of sinners?

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These are the extreme characteristic or the portrait of the apostate. I pray that none of these things dwell within any of our hearts. But remember that these have been given so that if we even begin to sense such things, we would be quick to deal with them personally or corporately. Even as the author of Hebrews writes in Hebrews 12:15 -

See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled;

IV. The Pronouncement on the Apostate (10:30-31)

So, we have the problem of the apostate, the prospect of the apostate, the portrait of the apostate and now we end with simply noting the pronouncement on the apostate. In verses 30-31 we read, “30 For we know Him who said, **“VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY.”** And again, **“THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE.”** 31 *It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*”

In verse 30 we really have the prophetic reminder that God punishes sin. The first quote is from Deuteronomy 32:35 and is a reminder that while a person may think he is getting away with sin, even openly mocking God in the process, divine justice will yet be enacted. God will have His day of vengeance and it will be, as we noted, far worse than the vengeance enacted by man. The second quote is from Deuteronomy 32:6, **“the LORD will judge His people.”** Remember that this originally was written to Israel, a chosen group or nation of people. But just because the nation as a whole was chosen to be the recipients of God’s special favor, this did not mean every individual Israelite was saved. As Paul would say in Romans, “not all Israel is Israel.” And here in Hebrew 10:30, the idea is that not all who profess Christ are indeed Christians. Not all who attend Church are necessarily believers and God will one day separate the wheat from the tares, the wheat being gathered up in the barn and the tares being burned with fire. Being in Church is no protection from the wrath of God. No, beloved, being in Christ is our only provision from God’s wrath and promise of eternal life.

And what is the pronouncement upon the apostate. Verse 31 says, *“It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”* Of this verse, the prince of Puritan preachers, John Owen wrote, “When a person falls into the hands of his enemies there is no law or love between him and them, and he can expect nothing but death.” As the LORD declared through the prophet Ezekiel, “The soul that sins [remains apart from the Redeemer whether by ignorance or by intention] will die! (18:3). ***If God is going to show those who believe the***

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greatness of His love in glory, does it not also stand to reason that He is going to show the greatness of His wrath on those who reject Him?

Let me close by saying that it is not my supposition that any among us have fallen into the apostasy describe in this text. But, please know that at the time of the reading of this letter to the first hearers, none of them had left. But the danger is always there. The possibility that all a person has experienced is an outward manifestation of Christianity rather than an inward change of heart and devotion to Jesus Christ and His Church. So I ask each of us to once again examine your heart; examine your lifestyle and behavior. Is there anything that might lead you or others who follow you down this potential path to apostasy? Confess it, pray for the grace to correct it. Remember that Jesus Christ bore the wrath of God for you so that by faith in Him alone you might be declare right before God and to have the prospect of eternal life with Him. Do not remain unrepentant and faithless but turn to Christ while His mercy is available.

Soli Deo Gloria

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