

The Word of Righteousness

The Warnings in the Book of Hebrews

The book of Hebrews is profound in its heavenly concepts and rich in the heavenly inheritance. It is unique among the Epistles in its view and presentation of God's economy for the fulfillment of His eternal purpose through the dispensing of God in His Divine Trinity into His chosen believers. The entire Bible reveals that God desires to have a full expression of Himself in His Son through a corporate people. It is for this purpose that God created a corporate man in His image and according to His likeness, predestinating His chosen ones unto sonship, and it is to this end that Christ carries out the sonship through His death, resurrection, and heavenly ministry in ascension, having pioneered the way to lead the many sons of God into glory, that is, into the corporate expression of God for eternity (Gen. 1:26-27; Eph. 1:5; Heb. 2:10). This, the economy of God for the carrying out of His purpose, is the underlying thought of the book of Hebrews.

Although God created man with such an intention and purpose, man became ruined and corrupted. The extent of man's fall is signified and exemplified by Chaldea in Babylonia, a demonic land full of idolatry. Because God will never be frustrated in the accomplishment of His purpose, He appeared as the God of glory to Abraham in Ur of the Chaldeans and called him to the land which He would show him (Acts 7:2-3). The land of Canaan, the good land to which Abraham was led, is a full type of the all-inclusive Christ for the building up of His fullness, which is His Body, the church (Eph. 1:22-23; cf. Josh. 14:1; Col. 1:12). In order to reach the land of Canaan from Ur of the Chaldeans, Abraham needed to cross the great river, the Euphrates. Joshua 24:2-3 says,

Thus says Jehovah the God of Israel, Your fathers dwelt across the River long ago, Terah the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor; and they served other gods. And I took your father Abraham from across the River and brought him throughout all the land of Canaan.

Genesis 14:13 speaks of "Abram the Hebrew." The root of the word *Hebrew* means "to pass over," particularly, to pass over a river from one region to another. Thus *Hebrew* means a "river crosser."¹ The concept of crossing a river is very meaningful in the revelation of God's economy both in the Old and New Testaments. The

descendants of Abraham, the Hebrews, are named for and known by the act of crossing over from an old and degraded realm into a new and higher one. Abraham crossed the Euphrates, the children of Israel crossed the Red Sea, and later they crossed the Jordan River back into the good land, where they built the temple for the full expression of God in type. In the same principle, the New Testament believers pass over from a realm that has been possessed, corrupted, usurped, and ruined by Satan into a new and heavenly realm, as signified by passing through the water of baptism.

The book of Hebrews was written with the view of crossing a river. The recipients of this Epistle believed in the Lord Jesus, but they were still holding on to their Jewish religion. Moreover, persecutions and insidious speaking had weakened their resolve and faith, causing them to stumble and tempting them to shrink back into Judaism. Therefore,

the intention of God's speaking in this book was that the Jews who believed in the Lord but still lingered in Judaism would leave the law and cross over to grace (4:16; 7:18-19; 12:28; 13:9), that they would leave the old covenant and cross over to the new covenant (8:6-7, 13), and that they would leave the ritualistic service of the Old Testament and cross over to the spiritual reality of the New Testament (8:5; 9:9-14); that is, that they would leave Judaism and cross over to the church (13:13; 10:25), that they would leave the earthly things and cross over to the heavenly things (12:18-24), that they would leave the outer court, where the altar is, and cross over to the Holiest of all, where God is (13:9-10; 10:19-20), that they would leave the soul and cross over to the spirit (4:12), and that they would leave the beginning of truth and life and cross over to the maturity of life in the truth (Heb. 5:11—6:1). (Recovery Version, Heb. 1:1, note 2)

The Incentive of Reward and Punishment for the Hebrew Believers

The overwhelming evidence of the book of Hebrews is that its recipients were believers in the Lord Jesus, redeemed by the once-for-all offering of the blood of Jesus and regenerated with His divine life. The writer of this book frequently identifies with his readers by using

the first person *we, us, and our* (2:1, 3; 3:14; 4:1, 11, 14-16; 6:1; 10:22-25; 12:1-2, 28; 13:13-15). He refers to his readers as brothers (3:1, 12; 10:19; 13:22), partakers of a heavenly calling (3:1), the house of God (v. 6), partners of Christ (v. 14), believers (4:3), having been sanctified once for all (10:10), having been enlightened (v. 32), having lived the Christian life with joy under persecution (vv. 32-34), of them who have faith (v. 39), sons of God under the discipline of the Father (12:5-9), partakers of the Father's holiness (v. 10), and having come forward to the blessings of the new covenant (vv. 22-24)—the spiritual Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the jubilant angels, the church of the firstborn, God Himself, the spirits of righteous men, the dear Lord Jesus, and His precious sprinkled blood.² Scot McKnight concludes, "The author treats them as believers and identifies himself so closely with them that division into true and false believers is impossible" (25).

However, these Hebrew believers were struggling under persecutions, threats, and evil speakings from the Judaizers of their day. After having been enlightened by the truth of the gospel, the Hebrew Christians endured a great conflict of sufferings and became a spectacle both in reproaches and in afflictions. The Jewish religionists had ostracized them, imprisoned some, robbed them of their property, and threatened their lives (10:32-34). These persistent attacks had weakened many of the believers, and the seductive speaking of the Judaizers had become a root of bitterness troubling them and causing them to lose their enjoyment of the grace of God (12:15). In such a perilous condition, many had ceased to assemble together with the believers and were contemplating a full return to Judaism. This would have been a great sin against God's governmental arrangement in the establishing of the new covenant with Christ as its reality, center, and focus.

Against this backdrop, the writer of Hebrews presents five warnings to his readers. On the one hand, the purpose of these warnings is to provide an incentive to the Hebrew believers to come forward to Christ as the reality, substance, and content of the new covenant and to remain in the dispensing of God for the carrying out of His economy. On the other hand, these five passages set forth the promise of a great reward to those who are faithful to remain in God's New Testament economy and a warning of a certain judgment, a punishment, to those who leave the New Testament way, abandon Christ, forsake the church, and fall away from the enjoyment of God as grace.

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The book of Hebrews is constructed basically with God's righteous government. It is a revelation of God's dispensational and governmental dealings with His people. In 2:1-4 the writer reminds the believers to give heed more abundantly to the speaking of God in the Son and to not neglect the great salvation that they were called to inherit. If anyone does neglect this salvation, he will not be able to escape a certain just recompense. In 3:7 through 4:13 the Hebrews are warned not to follow the negative pattern of the unbelieving generation in the wilderness, who went astray in their hearts, provoked and displeased God, and were not allowed to enter into the rest of the good land. As we will see, this passage promises the entrance into the coming millennial kingdom as a reward to the faithful river crossing Hebrews and the loss of the kingdom to those who fall away in unbelief. In 5:11 through 6:20 the Hebrew believers are called to be brought on

to maturity in the divine life and to not attempt to lay again the foundation of their faith. Those who advance to maturity are like the good earth that brings forth suitable fruit, but those who remain in immaturity and fall away from the right track of God's way are like the unprofitable earth whose fruit of thorns and thistles will be

burned at the judgment seat of Christ.

In 10:19-39 the Hebrews are called to come forward to the heavenly Holy of Holies, which is joined to their regenerated spirit, and to not shrink back to Judaism. To hold fast the boldness of their calling would result in great reward, but to waiver in the confession of their hope, to abandon the assembling together with the New Testament believers, and to fall back into Judaism—which is to sin willfully—placed them in danger of judgment and fervor of fire when the Lord executes His vengeance and judges His people. Finally, in 12:1-29 the Hebrews are charged to run the race of the Christian life and to not fall away from grace. As a reward, the overcoming Christians will receive the birthright, the blessings in the coming millennial kingdom, but those who fall away will suffer the loss of the birthright under the judgment of our God, who is a consuming fire. By all the foregoing, it is clear that the incentive of a dispensational reward or punishment for the New Testament believers is a pervading and strong device in the presentation of God's economy in the book of Hebrews. It is not surprising, then, that one-third of this Epistle is devoted to this subject.³

The Partners of Christ Inheriting So Great a Salvation

The book of Hebrews reveals the present Christ, who is

now in the heavens as our Minister and our High Priest, ministering to us the heavenly life, grace, authority, and power and sustaining us to live a heavenly life on earth. He is the Christ now, the Christ today, and the Christ on the throne in the heavens, who is our daily salvation and moment-by-moment supply (Recovery Version, Heb. 1:3, note 4). Chapters 1 and 2 contain a particular revelation of Christ, revealing His person and work from eternity to eternity. In the Godhead He is the effulgence of God's glory and the impress of God's substance (1:3). In creation He is the means through which the universe was made, the power that upholds and bears all things, and the Heir appointed to inherit all things (vv. 2-3). In redemption He accomplished the purification of man's sins and is now sitting on the right hand of God in the heavens (v. 3). Christ is the Son of God, even God Himself (vv. 5, 8). He is the One anointed to carry out God's plan, the Firstborn in His second coming, and the One on the throne in His kingdom (vv. 6, 8-9). Moreover, Christ is the Son of Man, a man Himself, crowned with glory and honor, set over the works of God's hands, who tasted death on behalf of everything, was perfected through sufferings, destroyed the devil, and became a merciful and faithful High Priest (2:6-10, 14, 17).

God the Father has appointed the Son to be not only the Accomplisher of all things in His economy but also the Heir of all things. Thus, the Son has both the authority to do everything in God's purpose and the right to inherit all things in His operation (Col. 1:16; John 13:3). The Son was anointed by the Father with the Spirit, and in His ascension He was both inaugurated as the Lord and Christ to administrate God's operation and designated as the legal Heir to inherit all things in God's economy. As the universal Heir, Christ needs the believers, His many brothers, to be His joint heirs—His companions of royal station and partners of like rank in His work, office, and dignity (Rom. 8:17; Heb. 1:9; Psa. 45:7; Keil 5:84; Thayer 407 [μέτοχος]; Brown 288 [*haber*]). As the partners of Christ, we are those who are to inherit salvation (Heb. 1:14). Concerning this, Witness Lee says,

Christ is wonderful, profound, unlimited, rich, and marvelous. As such a One, He certainly needs all of us to be heirs of salvation. Salvation is nothing less than the wonderful person of Christ Himself... To say that we are heirs of salvation means that we inherit this profound, marvelous, immeasurable, and unlimited Christ. Christ's profoundness requires our partnership. Our partnership with Christ unveils the profoundness of Christ. (*Hebrews* 52)

The salvation of which we are heirs is called "so great" a salvation (2:3, the intensified τηλικούτος). This salvation is great in what Christ is as the Son of God, even God Himself, the Son of Man, a real man, the Author of salvation, and the High Priest (vv. 10, 17). It is also great in

what Christ has done, is doing, and will do, including having made purification of sins, having tasted death for us, having destroyed Satan by partaking of our nature to release us from slavery, sanctifying us, and being able to help us (1:3; 2:9, 11, 14-15, 18). This salvation is also great in its extent, making us partners of God's appointed Heir and causing us to be saved to the uttermost (1:2, 9; 7:25; *Hebrews* 64-73).

The full salvation of the Triune God is in three stages and comprises many items. In the initial stage the believers are justified and regenerated in their spirit with God's life by His Spirit, causing them to be saved from God's condemnation and eternal perdition (John 3:3-6, 18, 16). In the progressing stage, the believers grow in life, are transformed in their soul by the life-giving Spirit, and are built together as God's habitation, causing them to be delivered from many negative matters and be saved into maturity in the divine life for the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose (1 Cor. 3:6-7; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 2:21-22). In the completing stage of salvation, the believers are conformed to the image of Christ and glorified through the redemption of their body (Rom. 8:29, 23). It is in this final stage of salvation that the believers receive the full inheritance of God's kingdom, participating in Christ's kingship and the topmost enjoyment of the Lord in the coming age.

The Author of Salvation Bringing Many Sons into Glory

Such a salvation is also great in that it brings many sons into glory (Heb. 2:10). God's glory is His expression; it is God Himself expressed. In the Old Testament the appearing of God to His people through His presence with them is called the glory of Jehovah (Exo. 16:7; 24:16; 40:34; Lev. 9:23; 2 Chron. 5:14). In the New Testament Christ as the eternal Word expressed and declared the invisible God by being manifested in the flesh, of which it is said, "We beheld His glory, glory as of the only Begotten from the Father" (John 1:1, 14, 18). However, Christ's humanity through His incarnation was a shell that concealed the glory of His divinity, which He possessed from eternity past. When the shell of His humanity was broken through His crucifixion, all the elements of His divinity—His divine life and divine glory—were released. This release of the glory of Christ's divinity was His being glorified by the Father with the divine glory (12:23-24; 17:1). John 17:22 says, "The glory which You have given Me I have given to them." The glory that the Father gave to the Son is the sonship with the Father's life and divine nature so that the Son may express the Father in His fullness. Now the Son has given this glory to His believers that they too may have the sonship with the Father's life and divine nature (v. 2; 2 Pet. 1:4) to express the Father in the Son in the Son's fullness.

Hebrews 2:10 says, “It was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and through whom are all things, in leading many sons into glory, to make the Author of their salvation perfect through sufferings.” As the many sons of God begotten through Christ’s resurrection (1 Pet. 1:3), we are now being led by Christ into glory, that is, into the eternal expression of God, which will consummate in the glorious New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:10-11). To this end, Christ is the Author (ἀρχηγός), Captain, Originator, Inaugurator, Leader, and Pioneer of our full salvation into the glory of God. This is the “so great a salvation” that we are to inherit, the salvation that we must not neglect (Heb. 2:3).

The Coming Inhabited Earth as a Reward to the Overcomers

Verse 5 says, “It was not to angels that He subjected the coming inhabited earth, concerning which we speak.” A particular item of Christ’s inheritance is the coming inhabited earth. The coming inhabited earth will be this earth in the coming age with God’s kingdom. Psalm 2:6-9 says,

I have installed My King / Upon Zion, My holy mountain.
/ I will recount the decree of Jehovah; / He said to Me:
You are My Son; / Today I have begotten You. / Ask of Me, /
And I will give the nations as Your inheritance /
And the limits of the earth as Your possession. / You will
break them with an iron rod; / You will shatter them like
a potter’s vessel.

In the coming kingdom age of one thousand years, the Father will give Christ the inhabited earth with all its nations as His inheritance (72:19; Zech 14:9; Rev. 11:15). Moreover, Christ will share this inheritance with His partners, the heirs of salvation. The consistent revelation of the Bible is that God has ordained man to rule over His created earth, because He needs a realm, a sphere, a dominion, in which He can exercise His authority to express His glory (Gen. 1:26-28; Psa. 8:4-8; Heb. 2:6-8). God’s purpose will ultimately be fulfilled through the overcomers, the believers who are faithful to participate in God’s full salvation. This is testified by the reference to Psalm 2 in Revelation 2:26-27:

He who overcomes and he who keeps My works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations; and he will shepherd them with an iron rod, as vessels of pottery are broken in pieces, as I also have received from My Father.

Thus the crucial terms for the believers and their inheritance in Hebrews 1 and 2—partners of Christ, heirs of salvation, so great a salvation, glory, and the coming inhabited earth—all form a single thought. In God’s complete salvation we are immersed into His glory so that we may enter into His heavenly kingdom into which He has called us, inherit it as the topmost portion of His blessing, and reign with Christ as His co-kings, participating in His kingship over the nations and sharing His royal, kingly joy in His divine government (2 Tim. 4:8; 1 Thes. 2:12; James 2:5; Rev. 2:26-27; 20:4, 6; Matt. 25:21, 23).

Hebrews 2:3 says, “How shall we escape if we have neglected so great a salvation, which, having had its beginning in being spoken by the Lord, has been confirmed to us by those who heard.” As we have seen, the recipients of the Epistle to the Hebrews are genuine believers in the New Testament age—“holy brothers” (3:1), partners of Christ, and heirs of salvation. In 2:3 the writer of this book indicates that the Hebrew believers were in danger of neglecting, being careless with, God’s full salvation. *Neglect* (ἀμελέω) is translated as *disregard* in Matthew 22:5, in which the invited guests made light of the

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wedding feast, and again in Hebrews 8:9, which says, “They did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the Lord.” To neglect, to disregard, to treat lightly or carelessly, so great a salvation put the weak and doubting Hebrew believers in danger of a “just recompense” (2:2). According to the context of Hebrews 2, this just recompense must be the loss of participation in the most precious part of our great salvation—the enjoyment of Christ as our saving life and rest in this age—and the loss of participation in the most glorious part of God’s full salvation—the inheritance of Christ’s kingdom with glory in the coming age. Thus we, like the Hebrews, are warned to give heed more abundantly to the things that we have heard, to not drift away, and to not neglect so great a salvation. If we are negligent and drifting, we shall not be able to escape a negative recompense.

Entering into the Sabbath Rest

The first six verses of chapter 3 unveil Christ as being superior to Moses, as an Apostle worthy of more glory and honor, and the builder of and faithful Son over God’s house. On the one hand, Christ in His humanity is the good material for God’s building—the foundation stone, the cornerstone, the topstone, and the living stone (Isa. 28:16; Matt. 21:42; Zech. 4:7; 1 Pet. 2:4). On the other hand, Christ in His divinity is the Builder of God’s house.

Following this brief word, the writer of Hebrews issues a second warning to his readers in the form of a quotation from the Old Testament:

Therefore, even as the Holy Spirit says, “Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the provocation, in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tried Me by testing Me and saw My works for forty years. Therefore I was displeased with this generation, and I said, They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways; as I swore in My wrath, They shall not enter into My rest!” (Heb. 3:7-11)

Here and in Psalm 95:8 (LXX), *provocation* and *trial* are the translation of Hebrew *Meribah* and *Massah*, respectively, the place where the people of Israel contended with Moses, where God tested Moses and the people, and the people tested Him (Exo. 17:7; Num. 20:2-3). The people of Israel had seen God’s miraculous acts, but they did not know His ways (Psa. 103:7). Because of this and many other failures in the wilderness, God became displeased with that generation, and as a result, they were not able to enter into the rest of the good land of Canaan.

In Hebrews 4:9, this rest is called the “Sabbath rest [*σαββατισμὸς*] for the people of God.” The principle of the Sabbath is that God has done everything, completed everything, and prepared everything for His economy and that we may and must stop our work and take God and all that He has accomplished for us as our enjoyment, rest, and satisfaction. The first time that the Bible mentions the Sabbath is after the creation of man (Gen. 2:2-3), the corporate vessel that God would fill with Himself to gain His expression and representation on the earth. Therefore, according to the deeper thought of this passage, God rested on the seventh day not merely because He had completed His six-day work of creation but because He had gained man in particular. As long as God has a man for His expression and representation, His heart is satisfied and He is able to rest. However, after the fall of man God lost the reason for His satisfaction in rest. This is why even as the Jewish religionists were observing the Sabbath outwardly, Jesus told them, “My Father is working until now, and I also am working” (John 5:17). As long as man is still in need of recovery, God’s rest is delayed.

According to this principle, we can see why the good land of Canaan was a rest to God and to His people. Even though the people experienced much warfare in the land, they were eventually able to build the temple, which was a great type of God’s expression and representation in man. When God’s glory filled the temple, God once again had His Sabbath rest. When God is expressed and represented, there is satisfaction for both God and man.

The Sabbath rest is Christ as our rest, typified by the good land of Canaan. Christ is rest to us in three stages (Lee, *Hebrews* 194-196; Recovery Version, Heb. 4:9, note 1). In the church age, He is the heavenly Christ, the One who has expressed, represented, and satisfied God and who rests from His work and sits on the right hand of God in the heavens. As such, He is rest to us in our spirit today (Matt. 11:28-29). In the millennial kingdom, after Satan has been removed from the earth, God will be expressed, represented, and satisfied by Christ with His overcoming saints. Then Christ with the kingdom will be the rest in a fuller way to the overcomers, who will be co-kings with Him and will share and enjoy His rest in a fuller way (Rev. 20:1-4, 6). Finally, in the new heavens and new earth, after all the enemies, including death, the last enemy, are subdued to Him, God will be fully expressed, represented, and satisfied by all His redeemed ones in Christ. At that time Christ, as the all-conquering One, with that glorious situation, will be the rest in the fullest way to all God’s redeemed for eternity.

The Sabbath Rest as a Reward to the Diligent Seekers of the Lord

Because entrance into the Sabbath rest mentioned in Hebrews 3 and 4 is conditional, it refers to only the first two stages of Christ’s being our rest. The rest in the third stage is not a prize but the full portion allotted to all the redeemed ones. The rest in the first two stages, however, is a prize to the diligent seekers of the Lord, who not only are redeemed but also have enjoyed Him in a full way so that they have become the overcomers. This is the rest that remains for us to seek after and to enter into diligently. It is in the second stage of the Sabbath rest that Christ will take possession of the coming inhabited earth as His inheritance for His kingdom in the millennium. All His overcoming followers, who seek and enjoy Him as their rest in the first stage, will participate in His reign at that time, and it is then that they will inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5; Psa. 37:11).

The writer of Hebrews warned his readers that they were in danger of having an evil heart of unbelief and falling away (*ἀπίστημι*—turning away, deserting, departing, standing aloof) from the living God (3:7-12). An unbelieving heart is the most evil heart. Nothing insults God more than our unbelief, and nothing honors Him more than our believing in Him. Those who fall away will lose their right to partake of the blessing of the coming Sabbath rest.

That the recipients of this warning are genuine believers is testified by their type, the children of Israel, who were redeemed and delivered from Egypt.⁴ God’s full salvation, which He intended for the children of Israel, included redemption through the passover lamb, the exodus from

Egypt, feeding on the heavenly manna, having their thirst quenched by the living water from the cleft rock, and partaking of the good land of Canaan. This is a rich type of the believers' redemption through Christ's death, their deliverance from the world through baptism, their feeding on Christ as the living bread, their drinking of Him as the living water, and their entrance into God's satisfaction and rest by growing in life and being built up together to become His expression and to represent His authority in the church as the fullness of Christ and the practical kingdom of God today (Eph. 1:22-23; Rom. 14:17).

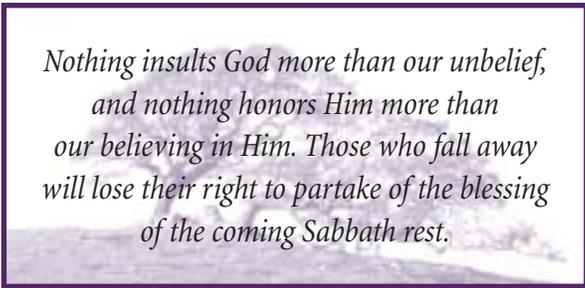
All the children of Israel shared in the passover lamb, the heavenly manna, and the living water, but only two overcomers out of all those who shared the exodus from Egypt—Joshua and Caleb—entered into the good land and partook of it. All the rest fell in the wilderness (Num. 1:1-3, 45-46; 14:29-30). This is a strong warning that not all believers who have been redeemed through Christ will partake of Christ as a prize, as their rest and satisfaction, in both the church age and the coming kingdom. Only those who, after being redeemed, seek Christ diligently will partake of Him in such a way. To this end, the writer of this book reminds the wandering, hesitating, and staggering Hebrew believers to receive the living word of God by faith and to allow it to operate in them subjectively (Heb. 4:12). Those who are faithful to do this will be rewarded in the church life of the present age and in the kingdom in the coming age, but those who turn away and depart from God, provoking Him through their unbelief, will suffer the loss of the subjective experience of Christ as our rest today, and they will not enter into the rest and glory of Christ as a prize in the millennium. To this end, we, the brothers of the Lord, should all beware (3:12).

Being Brought On to Maturity through the Word of Righteousness

From 4:14 to 5:10 the writer of Hebrews begins to present Christ as the great High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Such a One can be touched with the feeling of our weakness, is compassionate toward the ignorant, was perfected through sufferings, gave Himself as an offering for sins, and thus became the source, author, and cause of eternal salvation. Therefore, the believers must come forward to the throne of grace that is both in the heavens and in their regenerated spirit, which is indwelt by the Spirit of grace, so that they may receive mercy and find grace for timely help (4:16, 12; 10:29; Rev. 4:2; 22:1; Rom. 8:10; 2 Tim. 4:22).

Following this short passage is the third warning in the book of Hebrews, the exhortation to be brought on to maturity (5:11—6:20). Verses 11 through 14 of chapter 5 say,

Concerning whom we have much to say that is also difficult to interpret since you have become dull of hearing. For when because of the time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you what the rudiments of the beginning of the oracles of God are and have become those who have need of milk and not of solid food. For everyone who partakes of milk is inexperienced in the word of righteousness, for he is an infant; but solid food is for the full-grown, who because of practice have their faculties exercised for discriminating between both good and evil.



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The writer of this book characterizes the Hebrew believers as immature, even infantile. This has much to do with the spiritual food that they were eating. The word of God of which they partook is the good word, the word of grace, and the word of life (6:5; Acts 14:3; 20:32; Phil. 2:16). However, the milk of the word is for infants and

newborn babes (1 Pet. 2:2). The word of the beginning of Christ, being the foundation of the Christian life, comprises repentance from dead works, faith in God, the teaching of baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment (Heb. 6:1-2). The Hebrew believers had partaken of these foundational matters and had thus begun their Christian life. In their immaturity, however, they remained in these elementary experiences, as if laying the foundation of their Christian life again and again. Therefore, the writer of this Epistle charged them to leave the word of the beginning of Christ and be brought on to maturity and perfection by partaking of the word of righteousness.

The word of righteousness is deeper than the rudiments of the beginning of the oracles of God because it embodies the deeper thought of God's justice and righteousness in His dispensational and governmental dealings with His people. Thus, the book of Hebrews is an unveiling not only of Christ on a higher level but also of God's divine government among His chosen people. All five warnings in this book are based upon the fact that in Hebrews God is not the God of love but the God of righteousness, a consuming fire in His governmental dealings (12:29). This can be seen in the thematically consistent references to the generation of Israel in the wilderness. Although God loved the children of Israel, delivered them from

Egypt, and took care of them in the wilderness, their whole history is a picture of God's governmental dealings. Because of God's righteous dealings with them, most of those who came out of Egypt during the time of the exodus—including Aaron, Miriam, and even Moses (Num. 20:1, 12, 22-29)—were not allowed to enter into the good land of Canaan. The writer of Hebrews uses this type to warn the believers not to harden their hearts, fall away from God's grace, and remain in their immature condition. If they neglect the great salvation of God in this way, they will not escape a just recompense, they will lose the enjoyment of the Sabbath rest, and they will be near a curse (Heb. 6:8).

Deferring the Warnings—the Calvinist Paradigm

Verses 4 through 8 of chapter 6 are a difficult passage in the New Testament and have been the subject of much misunderstanding. George Guthrie, for example, calls this passage “one of the most disputed in the entire New Testament” (216). These verses say,

For it is impossible for those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and yet have fallen away, to renew themselves again unto repentance, crucifying again for themselves the Son of God and putting Him to open shame. For the earth, which drinks the rain which often comes upon it and produces vegetation suitable to those for whose sake also it is cultivated, partakes of blessing from God. But if it brings forth thorns and thistles, it is disapproved and near a curse, whose end is to be burned.

Eliding the four substantival participles in verses 4 and 5, the above passage reads, “It is impossible for those who...have fallen away, to renew themselves again unto repentance.” The source of the misunderstanding of this passage lies in the classical stances of Calvinism and Arminianism and the view of their exponents on these verses and on the book of Hebrews in general. Most commentators of both schools see the impossibility of repentance after falling away as an indication of eternal perdition for the falling ones, especially when mentioned in the context of curse and burning. McKnight states, “The image of being cursed by God, with its close association with fire, can only adequately be explained as an allusion to Gehenna or hell” (35). In order to allow for this interpretation, many respond by deferring this and similar passages to the perdition of unbelievers. John Calvin strongly asserts that those who fall away are reprobates utterly denied of salvation. He writes,

The apostle, also wishing to exclude apostates from the hope of salvation, gives the reason that “it is impossible to

restore them to repentance”...[God] hardens and he thunders against the reprobate, whose impiety is unforgivable...The apostle is speaking not concerning one particular lapse or another, but concerning the universal rebellion by which the reprobate forsake salvation. (616, 618-619)

John Owen sees the audience of this passage as mere professors of the faith, upon whom the privilege of hearing the gospel has been bestowed: “The whole description, therefore, refers to some gospel privileges, which professors in those days were promiscuously made partakers of” (*Exposition* 147; cf. *Epistle* 96). The gist of this thought is that the characteristics in verses 4 and 5 describe a person who has received a positive exposure to the gospel and even lived among a Christian community but has never been saved, the “intellectually convinced” but unconverted Jews (MacArthur 41). Buist M. Fanning summarizes this view (to which he does not subscribe):

Receiving enlightenment or a knowledge of the truth, experiencing the word, hearing the message, and so forth could refer to an exposure to the gospel and even a preliminary positive response to it without entailing the decisive and genuine experience of Christian conversion...Even repentance or some level of sanctification can be superficial and preliminary rather than genuinely personal and saving. (Bateman 179)

No principle of Reformed theology is compromised by the idea of nominal Christians falling short of true saving faith and suffering eternal perdition. Accordingly, this opinion is accepted by most Calvinist teachers, despite its ultimate flaws.⁵

Fanning represents another distinctly Calvinist interpretation, that perseverance in salvation requires visible and manifest evidence in a believer's life. He calls this the “evidence-to-inference” conditional (210), as seen in the grammar of Hebrews 3:14, for example: “We have become partners of Christ, *if indeed* we hold fast the beginning of the assurance firm to the end” (emphasis added). According to this interpretation, verse 14 seems to say, “If by the time of the end we have been seen to consistently hold fast the beginning of the assurance, then it is evident that in the past we did indeed become partners of Christ.” Guthrie says likewise,

Salvation has a continuity from present to future and manifests a life of perseverance and obedience to God. If the present involves true salvation, that salvation will be consummated at the end. If at the end one has failed to persevere, then the former public association with the Christian community is manifested to have been illegitimate. (229)

F. F. Bruce writes similarly: “He is not questioning the perseverance of the saints; we might say that rather he is insisting that those who persevere are the true saints” (144). By one device or another, the Calvinist view of Hebrews 6, and of the whole book in general, reduces the warning passages to a gospel exhortation and defers the consequences of falling away to unbelievers only.⁶

As we have seen, however, the simple issue of having saving faith for eternal salvation belongs to the rudiments of the beginning of the oracles of God; it is milk and not solid food. To simply acknowledge that genuine Christians persevere in salvation but unbelievers and nominal Christians do not is to drink only the milk of the word, the word of grace, and not the solid food of the word of righteousness concerning God’s governmental dealings with His own children (1 Pet. 4:17). Without eating the proper word of righteousness, Christians remain in the immature, infantile condition of the struggling Hebrew believers. The goal of the third warning in Hebrews is to encourage us to be brought on to maturity in the divine life under the vision of God’s government, which includes the reward and punishment of the believers both in the present age and even the more in the millennium, the age to come.

Perdition for the Hebrews—the Arminian Error

The Calvinist thought that the persons mentioned in Hebrews 6:4-8 are not true believers is very unsatisfying. Grant R. Osborne writes,

It is nearly impossible to relegate these descriptions to non-Christians. If this passage were found in Romans 8, we would hail it as the greatest description of Christian blessings in the entire Bible...This is a truly remarkable list of experiences, and there is hardly anything to compare with it elsewhere in terms of a brief, creedal-like presentation of the privileges in being a Christian.⁷ (Bateman 112, 114)

Walter C. Kaiser Jr., et al., concur: “This is one of the clearest descriptions of Christian initiation in the New Testament” (682). Similarly R. C. H. Lenski says, “The writer thus describes Christians who became Christians in the fullest sense of the word” (185). Henry Alford asserts that to deny that the persons spoken of are true and sincere believers is “clearly wrong, and contrary to the plainest sense of the terms here used.” He argues,

If they have never entered [the spiritual life], if they are

unregenerate, what possible logic is it, or even common sense at all, to say, that their shallow taste and partial apprehension makes it impossible to renew them: what again to say, that it is impossible *πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν* [to renew again] persons in whose case no *ἀνακαινισμός* [renewal] has ever taken place? (113)

Recognizing that believers are being spoken of in this passage, the Arminian school of salvation has taken this truth and added a great error to it. The thought that the true believers described in verses 4 and 5 can fall away from the faith, lose their salvation, and suffer eternal perdition is expressed by Osborne, among others. Osborne characterizes the falling away in verse 6 to be a “final apostasy...the unpardonable sin,” from which neither the sinner nor God Himself will recover him (Bateman 114-115). According to verses 7 and 8, he claims, the consequences of this apostasy are eternal. He concludes,

There are two kinds of land, both blessed by abundant rain from God...The good land refers to those who “go on to maturity” (Heb. 6:1), while the bad land refers to those who “fall away” (v. 6). The thorny soil alludes to Genesis 3:17-18, the curse of Adam... The

fact that “in the end it will be burned” (Heb. 6:8) refers to fiery final judgment. (115)

The Arminian interpretation also utilizes the theme in Hebrews that the fulfillments of the types are always greater than the type itself. Thus, Jesus is superior to Aaron and to Moses; the new covenant is superior to the old; salvation in the new covenant and the reward for boldness in faith are greater than the blessings of the old covenant; and the punishment for forsaking Christ and His covenant is worse than the punishment for transgressions against the Old Testament law (2:3; 10:35, 28-29). Osborne concludes that the escalated punishment spoken of in Hebrews must be eternal perdition for failing believers who have committed the “unpardonable sin” of apostasy:

An exact correspondence between the wilderness generation and the Hebrews’ situation is extremely unlikely, given the frequent use of the “lesser-to-greater” correspondence in the book. The escalation from physical death in the wilderness to eternal damnation in Hebrews is found throughout the book. (222)

The Arminian thought, however, neglects the nature of eternal salvation in the book of Hebrews. Christ is the Author, Captain, Originator, Inaugurator, Leader, and

The writer of Hebrews uses the type of the children of Israel in the wilderness to warn the believers not to harden their hearts, fall away from God’s grace, and remain in their immature condition.

Pioneer of the “so great a salvation” that we are inheriting, and what He began He will also finish. As such, He is the source and cause of eternal salvation, which He, as the High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, ministers to us (1:14; 2:3, 10). Therefore, He is able to save to the uttermost (παντελής—all-completely, entirely, perfectly, to the end, and for eternity) those who come forward to God through Him. The stumbling and failing Hebrew believers in chapter 6 are not in danger of losing the salvation given to them once for all, which is eternal in time, space, and quality. Rather, by remaining in immaturity and even falling away from God, they bring themselves near to the curse of God’s governmental dealing in the present and coming millennial ages.

“Disapproved and Near a Curse”— the Word of Righteousness

Both schools of salvation—Calvinism and Arminianism—require genuine believers to persevere in faith. Calvinism states that if an apparent believer does not manifest a life of perseverance, he was never a believer at all. Arminianism states that if a true believer does not continually manifest such a life, he will cease to be a believer. Osborne claims, “This is the place where Calvinism and Arminianism meet, in the realization that the elect will be known *after* they have persevered to the end” (117-118, emphasis added). Thus, the one who falls away from God, in the eyes of both schools, is a manifest unbeliever, who will suffer the curse and eternal burning of the lake of fire. The conclusions of both Calvinism and Arminianism obscure the message of chapter 6 of Hebrews. Just as the Calvinist teaching transforms this chapter into a gospel warning for unbelievers, the Arminian teaching turns it into an admonition against final apostasy, agreeing only on the premise that the punishment spoken of is eternal perdition. Both interpretations strip the passage of its true nature as a warning to failing believers in the light of God’s governmental discipline.

The thought of the writer here is that after a believer who has fallen away from the Lord desires to return to Him, there is no need to lay again the foundation of his Christian life—repentance from dead works, faith in God, and the teaching of baptisms, of the laying on of hands, of the resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment (vv. 1-2). One who falls away after being saved does not need to repent again of the things he has already repented of, thus repeating his old experiences. Once the foundation has been laid, it is impossible to lay it again. Verse 1 indicates that this is not needed; verse 4 says that it is not possible; and verses 7 and 8 show that it is not right, for to do this is to crucify again the Son of God and put Him to open shame. Rather, the returning believer should simply rise up and be brought on to maturity.

Gleason in Bateman notes, “The author’s purpose in the immediate context is to prod them on “to maturity” (6:1) rather than to threaten them with the loss of salvation, for their “redemption” was “eternal” (9:12)” (329). Verses 7 and 8 say,

The earth, which drinks the rain which often comes upon it and produces vegetation suitable to those for whose sake also it is cultivated, partakes of blessing from God. But if it brings forth thorns and thistles, it is disapproved and near a curse, whose end is to be burned.

The rain refers to the five categories of good things mentioned in verses 4 and 5, of which the Hebrew believers had partaken. *Produces vegetation* is an illustration of being brought on to maturity. The believers, as the earth, are tilled for God’s sake that they may bring forth Christ, as the vegetation, to perfection, to maturity (Matt. 13:3-8; 1 Cor. 3:6, 9). By bringing forth Christ they partake of blessing from God. On the other hand, the thorns and thistles signify the traditional things of the Hebrew believers’ old religion, although in principle the picture can be applied to any Christian who falls away from the right track of God’s way.

Disapproved (ἁδόκιμος) means “rejected, disqualified, counted worthless.” It is the same word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 9:27. This verse says, “I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest perhaps having preached to others, I myself may become disapproved.” The apostle was surely saved by grace through faith in Christ, and he had the full assurance of this blessing. Nonetheless, he was very much on the alert to run his course by subduing his body to serve his holy purpose so that he might not be disapproved and rejected at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10) and be found unworthy of the reward of the coming kingdom. Watchman Nee writes,

When we are disapproved by God, it does not mean that we do not have eternal life and are unsaved; it simply means that we have been put aside by God and are useless to Him. God’s punishment for the believer who sins is to put him outside of glory and into darkness, so that he has no share in the kingdom. (171)

The writer of Hebrews warns the believers that to bring forth worthless fruit would result in their loss of the kingdom as a reward to those who remain steadfast even under persecution and opposition.

The earth that brings forth thorns and thistles is also near a curse, whose end is to be burned. If the Hebrew believers were to bear the evil fruit of their falling away from Christ and His New Testament economy, they would be near the curse of suffering the punishment of God’s governmental dealing. Being near a curse is absolutely

different from the suffering of eternal perdition, which is the real curse. Nevertheless, it will entail the loss of the kingdom blessing in the millennial age and even a certain punishment under God's government. The believers themselves, as recipients of an eternal salvation, can never be burned, but all that they bring forth that is not according to God's economy will be burned (1 Cor. 3:12-15). This is the word of righteousness in Hebrews 6, the solid food that the precariously situated believers were exhorted to partake of so that they may grow in a normal way unto the maturity of the divine life.

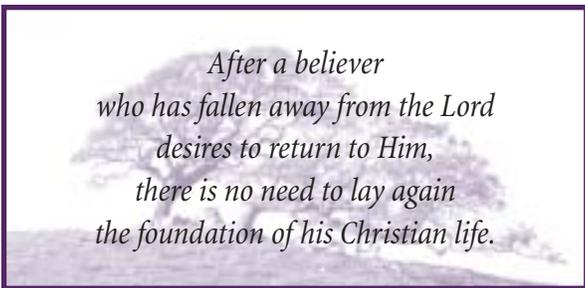
Coming Forward to the Holy of Holies

Chapter 7 of Hebrews continues to reveal Christ as a High Priest, perpetual, great, living, and able to save to the uttermost (vv. 3-4, 7-8, 25). Such a Priest was appointed according to the power of an indestructible life, having been perfected forever through His incarnation, human living, death, and resurrection (vv. 16, 28). As such, Jesus has become the surety, guarantee, bondsman, and sponsor of a better covenant (v. 22). Following this, chapters 8 through 10 unveil that Christ's new covenant is superior to the old. In the new covenant, Christ is a Minister of the holy places, even of the true tabernacle, ministering heaven into us so that we may have the heavenly life and power to live a heavenly life on earth (8:2). He is also the Mediator, the Executor, of a better covenant, the new testament, which He bequeathed to us by His death (v. 6). This better covenant not only was enacted upon better promises of a better law, the inner law of life, but also was consummated with Christ's better sacrifices, which accomplished for us an eternal redemption, and the better blood of Christ, which purifies our conscience (vv. 10-12; 9:23, 12, 14). Moreover, the High Priest of this better covenant, the eternal Son of the living God, ministers with a more excellent ministry and in the greater and more perfect tabernacle (8:6; 9:11). Finally, in chapter 10 Christ did the will of God by taking away the sacrifices of the old covenant and establishing His unique sacrifice of the new testament (vv. 7-10). "Having put away sin once for all, Christ has now imparted Himself into us as the divine life so that through the working of this divine life we may become the corporate reproduction of Himself" (Recovery Version, Heb. 10:10, note 1).

Verses 19 to 39 constitute the fourth warning in the book of Hebrews, to come forward to the Holy of Holies and to not shrink back to Judaism. Verses 19 to 22 say,

Having therefore, brothers, boldness for entering the Holy of Holies in the blood of Jesus, which entrance He initiated for us as a new and living way through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a great Priest over the house of God, let us come forward to the Holy of Holies with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

The Holy of Holies today is in heaven, where the Lord Jesus is (9:12, 24). The way for us to enter the Holy of Holies is by our regenerated spirit (4:12). The very Christ who is in heaven is now also in our spirit (2 Tim. 4:22). By comparing the account of Jacob's dream in Genesis 28:12 with the Lord's word in John 1:51, we see that Christ is the reality and fulfillment of the ladder set up on the earth and reaching to heaven. As the heavenly ladder, Christ joins our spirit to heaven and brings heaven into our spirit. Hence, whenever we turn to our spirit, we come forward to the Holy of Holies, to the throne of grace, and to God Himself (Heb. 4:16; 7:25; 11:6). The Holy of Holies, where Christ is, is the scene of the new covenant age. Verse 8 of chapter 9 says, "The Holy Spirit thus



*After a believer
who has fallen away from the Lord
desires to return to Him,
there is no need to lay again
the foundation of his Christian life.*

making this clear, that the way of the Holy of Holies has not yet been manifested while the first tabernacle still has its standing." Christ came to replace the old things of the first tabernacle, signified by the old covenant, in order to open the way to the Holy of Holies, the new covenant. By coming forward to the Holy of Holies, we come forward to the new age, to the new economy, dispensation, and administration in and through which God fulfills His purpose. Thus, to neglect, or even forsake, God on the throne, the throne of grace, the Holy of Holies, and the new covenant age frustrates God from accomplishing His purpose. This is a serious matter, for it is to sin against God's New Testament administration. To be sure, if a Christian persists in sinning in this way, God may eventually need to intervene with His government.

Not Sinning Willfully against God's Economy

Verses 23 through 25 of chapter 10 say,

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope unwavering, for He who has promised is faithful; and let us consider one another so as to incite one another to love and good works, not abandoning our own assembling together, as the custom with some is, but exhorting one another; and so much the more as you see the day drawing near.

For the Hebrew believers, at their time and in their situation, to abandon their own assembling together would have been to forsake the new covenant way of contacting God, to forsake the church, and to return to their old religion—Judaism. This would have broken God’s administration of grace, thus constituting a serious sin before God. Verses 26 and 27 continue,

For when we sin willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice of bulls and goats for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment and fervor of fire, which is to consume the adversaries.

To sin willfully here is to sin against God’s administration, His economy, which is focused on Christ and carried out through His new covenant ministry. Such a sin would have been committed after the Hebrews had received the knowledge of the truth, that is, after they had come to know that God had abandoned Judaism, which was formed according to the old covenant, and had initiated the new and living way of contacting Him according to the new covenant.

There no longer remains a sacrifice...for sins must not be misunderstood in the Arminian sense of the sacrifice of Christ becoming ineffective for backsliding believers. In fact, there is no need at all to debate this passage from the opposing views of Arminianism and Calvinism, as many have. Rather, if the Hebrew believers abandoned the church and returned to Judaism, there would be no sacrifice for sins in the old covenant, which had been altogether replaced by the one sacrifice of Christ in God’s new covenant. This passage does not say that the sacrifice of Christ for sins ever becomes of no effect. It simply means that if a man rejects the one sacrifice in the New Testament economy of God, he has no other, for the sacrifices of bulls and of goats have been put away. Alford puts it plainly: “There is but One true sacrifice for sins: if a man, having availed himself of that One, then deliberately casts it behind him, there is no second left for him” (199).

Verses 28 through 31 complete the thought of the writer concerning the willful sin against God’s new covenant:

Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without compassion on the testimony of two or three witnesses. By how much do you think he will be thought worthy of worse punishment who has trampled underfoot the Son of God and has considered the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine; I will repay”; and again, “The Lord will judge His people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

As was the case with the warning in chapter 6, the above verses in chapter 10 are unnecessarily turned into a field of contention between Arminian and Calvinist interpreters. Again, the classical Arminian view is expressed by Osborne:

In Hebrews 10:26-31...the author moves from the “lesser” death penalty experienced under the law to the “greater” eternal loss to be suffered by those who leave the “greater salvation” they had found in Christ. As Moses’ law was unable to provide salvation and so “prefigured” the final salvation under Christ, so its penalty “prefigured” the final loss of salvation here...The “living God” in Hebrews 10:31 is the “consuming fire” of 12:29. Terrible, eternal punishment is the only destiny of the apostate. (Bateman 300)

Once again, the Arminian conclusions and Calvinist responses obscure the word of righteousness in the present passage. The key to understanding all the warning passages in Hebrews is God’s governmental dealings with His sons in and according to His New Testament economy. The willful sin mentioned in verse 26 is forsaking the church and shrinking back to the old covenant after knowing that God had annulled it and established a new one. This is to give up the New Testament dispensation and economy of God, and in doing so, trample under foot the Son of God, regard the precious blood of Christ as common, and insult the Spirit of grace. This is not a small matter; it is a very serious sin, which put the falling Hebrew believers in danger of suffering punishment under God’s government. This governmental dealing takes place either, or both, in the present age and in the millennium, the age to come.

“Great Reward” and “Worse Punishment”

Verse 35 says, “Do not cast away therefore your boldness, which has great reward.”

The reward is something in addition to eternal salvation. Eternal salvation is obtained through faith, having nothing to do with our works (Eph. 2:8-9), whereas the reward is given for the work that we do after we are saved (1 Cor. 3:8, 14)...The reward will be given to us at the Lord’s coming back, according to our works (Matt. 16:27; Rev. 22:12; 1 Cor. 4:5). What we receive will be decided at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10) and will be enjoyed in the coming kingdom (Matt. 25:21, 23). The apostle Paul strived to gain the reward (1 Cor. 9:24-27; Phil. 3:13-14; 2 Tim. 4:7-8). Even Moses looked away to the reward (Heb. 11:26). Here the Hebrew believers were charged not to miss the reward—the coming Sabbath rest (4:9), the enjoyment of Christ and the reigning with Christ in the coming kingdom. (Recovery Version, v. 35, note 1)

As we have seen, verse 29 speaks of “worse punishment.” The writer of Hebrews is not concerned with the final salvation of his recipients, for according to what he has written, it is eternally secure. Christ has offered Himself to put away sin once for all, and He obtained for us an eternal salvation (7:27; 9:26, 28; 5:9). Having entered once for all into the Holy of Holies, He has found for us an eternal redemption (9:12). Rather, the concern of the writer of this book is whether his readers would receive a great reward or suffer a worse punishment. Verse 30 of chapter 10 says, “The Lord will judge His people.” It is His own, His sons and the members of His household, that the Lord will first judge, for the Lord’s judgment in His divine government begins in His own house (1 Pet. 4:17). The message of Hebrews is that we, the believers, must live according to the new covenant, in which the law of life has been imparted into our mind and inscribed on our heart (Heb. 8:10; 10:16; Rom. 8:2). To this end, we must come forward to the Holy of Holies in our spirit, where Christ is, and not shrink back in our fallen soul to the things of old, traditional religion. If we come forward to the new covenant economy of God, we shall receive a “great reward” at the judgment seat of Christ, but if we shrink back, we will break God’s administration and disobey His will, and for this we will receive “worse punishment” under God’s righteous government.

Gaining the Soul and Shrinking Back to Ruin

Hebrews 10:38 and 39 say, “My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My soul does not delight in him.’ But we are not of those who shrink back to ruin but of those who have faith to the gaining of the soul.” Alford identifies the one who shrinks back as

the δίκαιος [righteous one], as Delitzsch very properly insists: not τις [a certain one, someone] understood, nor ἄνθρωπος [a man] taken out of δίκαιος, but, in the true spirit of this whole cautionary passage, the very man himself who was justified, and partakes of the Christian life, by faith. The possibility of such a fall is, as he observes, among the principal things taught us by this Epistle. (206)

Thus, the persons in danger of shrinking back are the Lord’s righteous ones, true believers justified by faith in Him. Just as the Hebrew believers were called to come forward to the blessings and exercise of the new covenant, they were also in danger of shrinking back to Judaism with its ineffective and out-of-date sacrifices. *Ruin* here refers not to eternal perdition but to the

punishment meted out by the living God upon those who forsake the new covenant.

To gain the soul is to preserve and save it. Our being is of three parts—spirit, soul, and body (1 Thes. 5:23). Our soul is different from our spirit; Hebrews 4:12 speaks of the dividing of soul and spirit. Thus, the gaining of the soul is different from the salvation of our spirit. At the time that we believed in the Lord Jesus and were saved, our spirit was regenerated with the Spirit of God (John 3:6). In 1 Corinthians 5:5 Paul speaks of a sinful brother who was to be put out of the church. The apostle delivered such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, “that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” Even such a fallen, sinful brother would have his spirit saved, because the salvation of the spirit is eternal.

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However, the gaining of the soul is conditional. In the Gospels, Jesus charged His disciples to lose their soul-life for His sake and for the sake of the gospel in this age so that they may gain it in the next (Matt. 10:39; 16:25-27; Mark 10:29). In principle, to gain the soul, or the soul-life (ψυχή), is to allow the soul to have its enjoyment and to

escape suffering, but to lose the soul is to cause the soul to lose its enjoyment and thereby to suffer. In relation to the warnings in the book of Hebrews, to gain our soul at Christ’s coming is for our whole being to enjoy the coming Sabbath rest, that is, to share in Christ’s joy and glory in the coming kingdom. Whether we gain or lose our soul in the coming age depends on how we deal with our soul in following the Lord after we are saved and regenerated. If we lose our soul now for the Lord’s sake, it will be saved, or gained, at His coming back. This gaining of the soul will be the reward of the kingdom to the overcoming followers of the Lord. However, if we sin against God’s economy—His dispensing of Himself into our tripartite being for the fulfillment of His purpose in gaining His expression in man—we shall lose the enjoyment of our soul in the kingdom age; that is, our soul will suffer a certain kind of ruin at the coming of the Lord.

Running the Race under the Discipline of the Father

The first ten chapters of Hebrews present a thorough comparison of Judaism and God’s economy, charging the Hebrew believers, who were in danger of shrinking back, to live, walk, and go on by faith. Chapter 11 then presents a brief history of faith from God’s creation, through all the generations of God’s chosen people, to the New Testament believers, in order to prove that faith is the

unique pathway by which God's seekers receive His promise and take His way. In order to please God and come forward to Him, we must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. Following this, chapter 12 is the fifth and final warning in this book, a warning to run the race and not fall away from grace. Verses 1 and 2 say,

Therefore let us also, having so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, put away every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us and run with endurance the race which is set before us, looking away unto Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down on the right hand of the throne of God.

The Christian life is a race, which all the believers must run in order to win the prize, not salvation in the common sense but a reward in a special sense (1 Cor. 9:24; 3:14; Heb. 10:35).

One of the basic concepts of Hebrews is that God wanted the Hebrew believers to be holy, separated absolutely unto Him, not to remain common in Judaism but rather to enter into the Holy of Holies. To put away all encumbrances and entangling sins and run the race of the Christian life by looking away to Jesus and coming forward to Him in the Holy of Holies requires the diligent cooperation of the believers. However, the Lord's children, like the Hebrew believers in the ancient times, often do not render Him the adequate cooperation and hinder His working of holiness within them. Therefore, in His wisdom and under His sovereignty, the Father disciplines the believers with the intention that they would partake of His holy nature (12:5-11). Verses 5 and 6 say,

You have completely forgotten the exhortation which reasons with you as with sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when reproved by Him; for whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives."

Clearly, this discipline takes place in the present age, while the sons of the Father are still in the race. As a result of this discipline, the believers partake of the Father's holiness and bear the peaceable fruit of righteousness (vv. 10-11).

However, the Father's discipline, His chastisement, may also need to be continued into the coming age, the kingdom age of one thousand years. In Hebrews 12 we read that genuine believers are chastised by the Father for the sake of their perfection, but nowhere in the Bible do we have a clear word that the discipline of the Father's children is of necessity restricted to the present age. Second Corinthians 5:10 tells us that we all, the New Testament

believers, will appear before the judgment seat of Christ, "that each one may receive the things done through the body according to what he has practiced, whether good or bad." Similarly, Revelation 22:12 says, "Behold, I come quickly, and My reward is with Me to render to each one as his work is." When Christ returns at the end of this age, He will set up His judgment seat to evaluate the life and work of every believer. By definition, this will take place not during the present age but at its consummation, just prior to the commencement of the kingdom age. Just as a positive reward at the judgment seat will be a prize, a negative reward will be a chastisement, or punishment. As a result of this judgment, the overcoming believers will be rewarded with an entrance into the kingdom, but the foolish followers of the Lord and His unfaithful slaves will be barred from the glorious realm of that age (Matt. 24:45—25:30). To receive such discipline is to not escape the recompense of neglecting our great salvation (Heb. 2:3); it is to not enter into the coming Sabbath rest (3:11; 4:9); it is to be disapproved and suffer the curse of God's governmental dealing (6:8); and it is to suffer the "worse punishment" of the loss of our soul's enjoyment in the coming age (10:29, 39). Thus, even the coming age of the kingdom will be a time for the Father to deal with His children.

Not Falling Away from Grace

Verse 15 of chapter 12 says, "Looking carefully lest anyone fall away from the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and through this many be defiled." The grace of God came to us through Christ (John 1:14, 17). Hence it is also the grace of Christ, even Christ Himself, who is in our spirit (2 Cor. 13:14; Gal. 6:18; 2 Tim. 4:22). To fall away (*ὑστερέω*) is to come short, "to be left behind in the race" of the Christian life (Heb. 12:1; Thayer 646). The companion to verse 15 is Galatians 5:4, which says, "You have been brought to nought, separated from Christ, you who are being justified by law; you have fallen from grace." Here, to fall from (*ἐκπίπτω*) grace is to lose its practical effect, depriving it of all profit. In Acts 27 the Greek word is used in a nautical sense as the classical word for a ship being driven out of her course onto shoals or rocks (vv. 17, 26, 29; Marshall 593). The Hebrew believers, like the Galatians, had received the Spirit, had begun by the Spirit, and had been bountifully supplied the Spirit (Gal. 3:2-3, 5; Heb. 6:4). However, by returning to their old religion they were in danger of insulting the Spirit of grace (10:29), falling from grace, and rendering Christ of no effect or profit in their practical experience. The Hebrews were to watch carefully against this possibility, lest they lose the enjoyment of Christ and thus sin against God's economy in the age of grace.

Root of bitterness in 12:15 is a reference to Deuteronomy 29:18, which says,

Beware that there is not among you any man or woman or family or tribe whose heart turns away, even today, from Jehovah our God, to go and serve the gods of those nations; that there is not among you a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood.

The root here refers to a rebellious person who rises up from among the people, speaking perverted things to draw people away from the experience of the grace of God (Acts 20:30). The evil ministry of such persons is always used by Satan, the subtle serpent, to defile its hearers and corrupt their thoughts from the simplicity and the purity toward Christ (2 Cor. 11:3). To be separated from Christ, to give up the enjoyment of Christ in the new covenant way, through the subtlety of the ministers of Satan (vv. 14-15) is to fall away from the grace of God and thus annul our participation in His economy for the fulfillment of His purpose in the present age. This is a great and tragic sin.

Not Giving Up Our Birthright

Hebrews 12:16 and 17 say,

Lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one meal gave up his own birthright. For you know that also afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected; for he found no place for repentance, even though he sought it with tears.

Another cause for falling away from the grace of God is the fornicator. This reference brings to mind Reuben, the first son of Jacob, who was wrecked by his fleshly lust and thereby lost his birthright (Gen. 49:3-4; 1 Chron. 5:1-2; Eph. 5:5). A profane person is one who loves the world and the worldly things and is captured by the enjoyment and entertainment of physical things. He is like Esau who, lacking “any sense of spiritual values” (Bruce 351), despised his birthright and sold it for one meal (Gen. 25:29-34). Esau’s birthright as the firstborn son of Isaac was the double portion of the land, the priesthood, and the kingship among God’s people. Because of his profaneness in giving up his birthright, the double portion of the land was given to Joseph, the priesthood went to Levi, and the kingship was assigned to Judah (Deut. 33:8-10; Gen. 49:10).

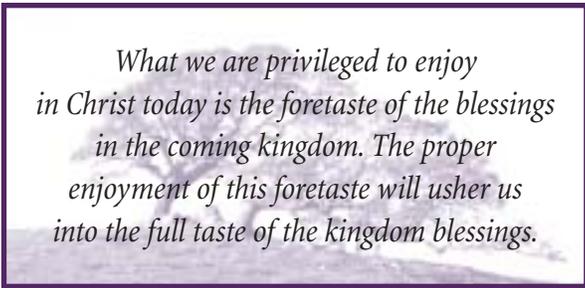
We Christians, born of God, are the firstfruits of His creatures that He has reaped in His creation (James 1:18). In that sense we are the firstborn sons of God. Hence, the church is called the church of the firstborn (Heb. 12:23). As the firstborn sons of God, we have the

birthright. This includes the inheritance of the coming inhabited earth (2:5-6), the priesthood (Rev. 20:6), and the kingship (v. 4), which will be the main blessings in the coming kingdom. This birthright will be a reward given to the overcoming believers in the millennial kingdom. However, according to the strong warning in the types of Reuben and Esau, the profane, world-loving, and world-seeking Christians will lose the blessings of their birthright at the Lord’s coming back.

What we are privileged to enjoy in Christ today is the foretaste of the blessings in the coming kingdom. The proper enjoyment of this foretaste will usher us into the full taste of the kingdom blessings. Witness Lee asks,

If we do not enjoy Christ today as our good land, how can we enter into His rest in the kingdom and inherit the earth with Him? If we do not exercise our priesthood today to contact Him and prayerfully minister to Him, how can we fulfill our priestly duty in the kingdom? If we do not exercise our spirit with a God-given authority to rule our self, our flesh, our entire being, and the enemy with all his power of darkness today, how can we be Christ’s co-kings and rule

the nations with Him in His kingdom (Rev. 2:26-27)? Our enjoyment of Christ and the practice of the priesthood and kingship today are the preparation and qualification for our participating in Christ’s kingdom tomorrow. (Hebrews 585)



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Receiving an Unshakable Kingdom

In Hebrews 12:18 through 24 the writer of this book gives the final comparison between the old covenant with the old things in it and the new covenant with its blessings. The old covenant is encapsulated by the awesome and fearful experience of the children of Israel at Mount Sinai—fire, darkness, gloom, whirlwind, the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of unbearable commandments—which are earthly and physical, signifying the side of the law, where everyone, including Moses, was in fear and trembling. The items of the new covenant—the elevated Mount Zion, the beautiful heavenly Jerusalem, the jubilant angels, the blessed firstborn of the church, God (the Judge of all), the spirits of righteous men, the dear Lord Jesus, and His precious sprinkled blood—are heavenly, spiritual, and eternal, signifying the side of grace, where both the firstborn and the spirits of righteous men are saved by grace. Following this, verses 25 through 27 say,

See that you do not refuse Him who speaks, for if those

did not escape who refused Him who warned them upon the earth, much more we shall not escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven, whose voice at that time shook the earth but now has promised, saying, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also heaven." And this word, "Yet once more," shows clearly the removal of the things being shaken as being of things having been made, that the things which are not shaken may remain.

The final destiny of all things old—even the old earth and old heaven themselves—is to be shaken and removed so that only the new remains. In verse 28 the writer says, "Therefore receiving an unshakable kingdom..." That which remains after the shaking and removing of the old creation, old covenant, and old religion is an unshakable kingdom.

This kingdom has two aspects, its reality in the present age and its manifestation in the coming age of one thousand years. We, the believers, were regenerated into the kingdom and transferred into the kingdom (John 3:5; Col. 1:13). Now we are in the kingdom, which today is the proper church life (Rev. 1:9; Rom. 14:17). However, what we are in now and what is in the church today is the kingdom in its reality, whereas what will come with Christ's return in the future will be the kingdom in its manifestation. The reality of the kingdom is an exercise and a discipline to us in the church today (Matt. 5:3, 10, 20; 7:21), but the manifestation of the kingdom will be a reward and an enjoyment to us (16:27; 25:21, 23).

The entrance into the reward and enjoyment of the kingdom in its manifestation is the principle of all the positive points related to the warnings in the book of Hebrews. If we take the Spirit's exercise and God's discipline in the reality of the kingdom today, we will receive the Lord's reward and enter into the enjoyment of the coming kingdom. To enter into the glory of the kingdom will be the full taste of our great salvation, the foretaste of which we enjoy today (Heb. 2:3). It will be to inherit the coming inhabited earth to rule as co-kings over the nations (v. 5). It will also be to enter into the Sabbath rest in the manifestation of the kingdom (4:9), to partake of the full blessing from God (6:7), to gain the great reward (10:35), and to gain our soul in the coming age (v. 39).

On the other hand, the suffering of the loss of the reward in the coming kingdom is the underlying meaning of all the negative points concerning the warnings in this book. If we do not come forward to Christ and His new covenant at the throne of grace in the true Holy of Holies, we will miss the coming kingdom, we will not be rewarded with the manifestation of the kingdom at the Lord's coming back, we will have no right to enter into the glory of the kingdom to participate in Christ's reign,

and we will lose our birthright and therefore will be unable to inherit the earth in the coming age, to be the royal priests serving God and Christ in His manifested glory, and to be Christ's co-kings ruling all the nations with His divine authority. This is the basic concept on which all five warnings in Hebrews are given and with which they are all pervaded.

Verses 28 and 29 of chapter 12 conclude the fifth warning: "Let us have grace, through which we may serve God well-pleasingly with piety and fear; for our God is also a consuming fire." God is holy; holiness is His nature. To meet the demands of His holiness we need to be sanctified, to be made holy by the heavenly, present, and living Christ. For their sanctification, it was necessary that the Hebrew believers separate themselves from the unholy Judaism unto the holy God, who has fully expressed Himself in the Son under the new covenant. If they did not, they would be dealt with by the holy God as the consuming fire. This is a fearful thing (10:31).

Salvation, Perdition, Reward, and Punishment

To understand the five warnings in the book of Hebrews, we must grasp the significance of four great matters: salvation, perdition, reward, and punishment. The salvation procured by Christ for the believers is by grace through faith, having nothing to do with our works (Eph. 2:8-9). Moreover, this salvation is eternal, based upon the eternal redemption accomplished by Christ through the offering of His blood, which He made once for all (Heb. 5:9; 9:12, 14, 22, 26). Because of the eternal nature of this salvation, those who are saved shall never perish. Thus, God's salvation, which is given to us freely and eternally, is secured for the believers by the will of God (Eph. 1:5; John 6:39), by the selection and calling of God (Eph. 1:4; 2 Tim. 1:9), by the love and grace of God (1 John 4:10; Rom. 8:38-39), by the righteousness of God (1:16-17), by the covenant of God (Heb. 8:8-13), by the life of God (John 10:28), by the power of God and of Christ (v. 29), by God Himself (James 1:17), by the redemption of Christ (Heb. 10:14), and by the promise of Christ (John 6:37).

In the book of Hebrews the new covenant has been established, Christ's once-for-all offering has been made, and sin has been put away. Therefore, this book does not focus on the eternal salvation or perdition of the Hebrews. Instead, it has much to say about the reward or punishment of the eternally saved believers, which relates to their entrance into the kingdom in the coming age of one thousand years. The recompense of the kingdom as a reward is something given in addition to eternal salvation as an incentive to us that we may be faithful in our living by the Lord and in our working for Him. It is according to righteousness, as testified by Paul in 2 Timothy 4:8,

and it is according to the work that we do by the Lord's life after we are saved (Matt. 16:27; 1 Cor. 3:8, 14; Rev. 22:12). This reward will be decided by the judgment seat of Christ, which will be set up at Christ's coming back (2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Cor. 4:5). The judgment seat will not be for the unsaved; they will be judged at the white throne a thousand years later (Rev. 20:11-15). Rather, at the judgment seat of Christ the decision will be made regarding what recompense we shall receive—the enjoyment in the coming kingdom or some punishment.

Although the believers cannot be lost, they may suffer some dispensational punishment for their failures, as Gleason says,

His plea for their active maturity that should logically "accompany salvation" (6:9) is driven by the threat of severe discipline and loss of blessing (6:7-8), but not their final damnation...Though the threat of eternal damnation is not in view, the warning of covenant discipline remains severe. (Bateman 329, 334)

The Hebrew believers were warned not to drift away or go astray in their hearts (Heb. 2:1; 3:10), not to fall after the example of the disobedient children of Israel (4:11), not to become dull of hearing and remain infants (5:11, 13), not to sin willfully against the New Testament economy of God (10:26), not to shrink back to ruin (v. 39), not to fall away from the grace of God (12:15), and not to turn away from Him who warns from heaven (v. 25). If they were to sin against God's arrangement and provision in the New Testament, they would receive a chastisement from Him. For some, and to some extent, this judgment is meted out in the present age, but for others, who do not respond to the salutary discipline of the Father and are thus not brought on to maturity in the present age, further chastisement will be apportioned to them as a dispensational punishment in the kingdom age. The unbelievers are faced with two choices—salvation or perdition. We, the saved ones, also must consider two possibilities—receiving a reward or suffering some punishment. We all must be clear about this, for it is a matter of God's economy, God's way of dealing with His children. Only if we clearly see these four great matters—salvation, perdition, reward, and punishment—can we be able to understand the five warnings in the book of Hebrews concerning the Lord's dealing with the believers in the present and coming ages.

by John Campbell

Notes

¹The name *Hebrew* ('*ibriy*) is related to the verb '*abar*, meaning to "pass over," such as to cross a sea, and to the noun '*eber*, meaning "the region beyond," or "beyond the sea" (Brown 716-720). In Genesis 14:13 (LXX), *Hebrew* is translated περᾶτης, meaning "one who crosses beyond the boundary." The verb '*abar* may also mean to "emigrate, leave one's territory or city" (Brown 718). Thus, Keil translates *Hebrew* in verse 13 as "an immigrant from beyond the Euphrates" (1:205). (There is insufficient ground in Genesis to argue that *Hebrew* is a patronymic derived from *Eber* [10:25] as Young claims [473]). Joshua 24:2 says, "Thus says Jehovah the God of Israel, Your fathers dwelt across the River [*be'eber hanahar*] long ago, Terah the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor; and they served other gods." Abraham, as the first river crosser in God's economy, crossed from the idolatrous land beyond the Euphrates to the high and good land of Canaan, where he was led by God to become the father of the Hebrews, the corporate river crossers.

²The designations of the Hebrews, as listed above, are from direct statements and addresses. If we also include implications from their contexts, we can add to the list: sons being led into glory (2:10), brothers of Christ,

the church (v. 11-12), those who have tasted the heavenly gift, partakers of the Holy Spirit (6:4), those who have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come (v. 5), and heirs of the promise (v. 17). These too clearly show that the recipients of the Epistle to the Hebrews were genuine believers in the new covenant.

³The figure of one-third is based on the length of the warning passages as identified above. This division of the sections is almost identical to that of Buist M. Fanning of Dallas Theological Seminary, for example, who includes one additional verse to the second warning (Bateman 173).

⁴Randall C. Gleason writes,

Because of their typological relationship to the Exodus generation, I consider those warned Hebrews to be genuine believers in danger of forfeiting covenant blessings and of undergoing the physical discipline of God while escaping final judgment. The basis for this understanding is that despite their unbelief and rebellion at Kadesh-Barnea, the Exodus generation was a redeemed people. (Bateman 344-345)

Gleason goes on to provide eight reasons from the Old Testament why the Exodus generation should be considered a redeemed, saved, and ultimately forgiven people (345-346; Exo. 15:13, 2; Psa. 106:10; 78:38). He cites a number of authors who concur with his conclusions, including J. Dwight

Pentecost and George H. Lang. Pentecost writes,

Because the writer refers to the recipients of this epistle as ‘holy brethren,’ it is obvious that he does not consider them to be unbelievers. They are partakers of the heavenly calling, and the word *partaker* emphasizes the genuineness of their experience. (74)

Concerning the Sabbath rest, he says,

Some, believing this letter was addressed to unbelievers, interpret the “rest” as salvation rest or eternal rest; that is, they believe “rest” refers to the eventual result of salvation. However, as has been clearly demonstrated, this epistle was addressed to believers, not to unbelievers. Moreover, after the writer has drawn a lesson from the experience of the redeemed nation Israel in the Old Testament, it would be most strange for him to suddenly turn from addressing believers to giving an exhortation to unbelievers. (82)

⁵The Calvinist view that the warnings in Hebrews are delivered to unbelievers sometimes entails arguments that can become stretched and distorted. Fanning, for example, recounts the view of some that the writer’s use of first person pronouns and his addresses to his readers as brothers

may be the sort of charitable and pastoral gesture common even today of sermonic form...that identifies with the audience and treats them in keeping with their self-profession without presuming to know the true salvific status of every person present. (Bateman 180)

In other words, this view proposes that the writer of Hebrews practiced the “pastoral” charity of calling tares by the name of wheat because of his lack of omniscience about his audience. This is not at all the spirit of the apostles and preachers of the New Testament, especially the writer of Hebrews, who is exceedingly bold and frank. Such misleadings are the unfortunate fruit of what John Owen called the “tedious contests among the learned” (*Exposition* 145).

⁶For a more detailed discussion of the Calvinist and Arminian views, please see “The Perseverance of the Saints,” *Affirmation & Critique*, VIII.1, (April 2003): 54-68.

⁷Bateman’s helpful compilation of essays and responses on the warning passages in Hebrews represents views from four schools: Classical Reformed, Moderate Reformed, Classical Arminian, and Wesleyan Arminian. The authors of all four points of views concur that the recipients of the Epistle to the Hebrews were true believers (24). Osborne summarizes this conclusion, citing the descriptive participles in Hebrews 6:4-5 as “components of a unitary experience of evangelical grace in the life of the believer” (220). He continues,

This is far more in keeping with the language of the epistle and the fact that the author never treats them as quasi-Christians or non-Christians. They are “lazy” or “sluggish” (νωθρός), spiritually dull and unresponsive to teaching (5:11; 6:12), but they are believers. (221)

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