

THE STUDY OF HEBREWS—YEAR 2
LESSON 4—NOTES
HEBREWS 10:26-39
A TERRIFYING WARNING AND ENDURING MEMORIES

INTRODUCTION

As believers we have spiritual rest, peace and redemption through Jesus Christ. We know our sins are not held against us and we have access to God himself. In our study last week (10:19-25) believers are encouraged to draw near in full assurance of faith and to hold fast their confession of hope. The author now moves on to the fourth warning contained in the book of Hebrews. A person can't renounce Christ and still expect to receive forgiveness of sins. The punishment for those who apostatize will be terrifying. The things of God can't be discredited without horrible consequences. John MacArthur writes, *"Of the five warnings given in Hebrews, the one in this passage is by far the most serious and sobering. It may be the most serious warning in all of Scripture."*

After giving the Hebrews a warning, the author then shows his pastoral love by balancing this terrifying threat with a heartening reminder for his listeners to recall past times of courageous and joyful faith. Those evidences of God's gracious work in their hearts should fortify their confidence that He is faithful to keep His promises.

THE NATURE OF APOSTASY—A TERRIFYING WARNING

VERSE 26-27: For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins. But a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES.

The author of Hebrews reasons that those who ignore or reject the Son of God will receive the severest of punishments. The law *"spoken through angels"* was so holy that its violation *"received a just penalty."* How much more dire will punishment be for those who ignore the message of salvation spoken by the Son, who is superior to the angels (Heb. 2:1-4). In Hebrews 6:4-8, the author listed the privileges of participating in the new covenant community. Then warned that

anyone who abandoned such gracious gifts by committing apostasy could not be restored because *“they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame”* (6:6). Now, the author repeats his argument. To disregard the word of salvation spoken by Christ, to reject the gospel and willfully walk the path that leads to destruction, there will no longer be a sacrifice for your sins, but a terrifying **“fury of a fire”** judgment that will **“consume the adversaries.”** The Greek form of this sentence reads *“and now fire will eat up the enemies.”*

These verses give a clear and concise scriptural definition of apostasy—**“receiving the knowledge of the truth,”** (the gospel), but **“willfully”** (intentionally and deliberately) remaining in sin. An apostate has seen and heard the truth, understands it, but willfully rejects it.

In the New Testament, “knowledge” in the Greek language has two primary translations. *“Gnosis”* which is considered an ordinary knowledge, and is often used for general spiritual knowledge, and *“epignosis,”* the word used in verse 26, which denotes full knowledge, understanding, and discernment. The **“knowledge”** here describes a person who has much more than just information of the gospel, but knows it well.

John Macarthur explains,

Every apostate is an unbeliever, but not every unbeliever is an apostate. Many people have never had the opportunity to hear the gospel, even in part. They are sinful and, of course, do not believe in Christ, because they have never heard of Him or of His claims. An apostate, however, is well acquainted with the gospel. He knows more than enough to be saved, he has all the information. He lacks nothing intellectually. He has epignosis. He is among those who have *“once been enlightened,... tasted of the heavenly gift,”* and even *“been made partakers of the Holy Spirit”* (Heb. 6:4). Apostates are not made in the absence, but in the presence, of Christ. They are bred almost without exception within the church, in the very midst of God’s people. Eventually, sometimes even after years of pretense and self-deception, the unbeliever who acts like a believer finally falls away. He gives up, loses interest, and goes his own way. He returns to sinning willfully, with no more regard for the Lord’s way or the Lord’s people. To know God’s way, to study about it and hear about it, to identify with believers, and then turn away is to become apostate. The process of falling away may be gradual, but

at some point a conscious decision is made to leave the way of God, and reject the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

For this person ***“there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.”*** The teaching of the author in contrasting the old covenant and its animal sacrifices to the once-for-all sacrifice offered by Jesus to inaugurate the new covenant (8:1-10:18) has shown why ***“there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,”*** if we turn away from Christ to seek cleansing elsewhere. The blood of bulls and goats could never take away sins, but now even their foreshadowing function has been rendered obsolete by the once-for-all, propitiatory offering of Christ’s body. As we learned from Psalm 40, *“He does away with the first in order to establish the second”* (10:5-10). This development in redemptive history means that, now that Jesus has inaugurated the new covenant (10:18), *“there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins”* in any sense or possible way under the old covenant system.

A believer may sometimes lapse into sin and stray from intimacy with the Lord and with His people. But, eventually he will come back. He will be under too much conviction to stay away permanently. In the meantime, he will be robbed of joy and peace and of many other blessings. According to Scripture, people who profess to know Christ at one time but later deny Him were never really saved to begin with. 1 John 2:9 says, *“They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us.”*

A true believer will never depart from the faith *“for he who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ”* (Phil. 1:6), so those who do so are revealing that they were never truly saved (John 8:31; Heb. 3:14).

Even true Christians can sin, however, and because of that, may lack assurance of salvation (Psalm 51:12). A failure to grow spiritually can also rob us of the confidence that we are God's children (2 Pet. 1:9). But anyone indwelt by the Holy Spirit is secure eternally, because He is the *“deposit guaranteeing our inheritance”* (Eph. 1:14). -John MacArthur

APOSTASY AND THE JUDGMENT OF GOD

VERSES 28-31: 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.

The author of Hebrews continuously contrasts the Mosaic law to the new covenant. Here he contrasts the punishments under the Mosaic law with the judgment that will be meted out to those who reject the revelation through Jesus Christ. Those who reject the Mosaic law are condemned to death on the basis of two or three witnesses. The words “***set aside***” should not be understood merely as a violation of the law of Moses. The verb is used to describe blatant and outright rebellion representing Israel’s apostasy against the Lord; to reject the authority of God, who spoke the law’s commandments. In Ezekiel 22:26 God accuses Judah’s priests of having “*done violence*” to his law and having defiled his sanctuary. Because the punishment was so severe, Israel’s judges were obligated to establish an offenders guilt through the “*evidence of two or three witnesses*” (Num. 35:30; Deut.17:1-7). Every Israelite transgressed the law, but the death penalty was assigned to those who defiantly violated what the law mandated. (Thomas Schreiner, Dennis Johnson)

As we have seen so often in Hebrews, the earthly punishment forecasts and anticipates a heavenly punishment. Mere physical execution, cannot compare with the “***severer punishment***” awaiting those who have contemptuously rejected the Son of God, the mediator of the new and better covenant. Apostasy involves total rejection of the Godhead—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Just as to accept the Son is to accept the Father, so to reject the Son is to reject the Father.

Three Marks of Apostasy

Verse 29 shows that those who *trample the Son of God*, regard as *profane the blood of the covenant*, and *outrage the Holy Spirit* will have an even more severe punishment than that found in the Old Testament.

The guilt of the apostate from the Christian faith is established on three counts:

1. He has ***“trampled under foot the Son of God.”*** Previously the author characterized the sin of apostasy as *“crucifying once again”* and *“putting him to open shame”* (6:6), the divine and messianic Son. Now the defiant scorn is portrayed as ***“trampling underfoot,”*** treating him as utterly worthless. It is contempt of the most flagrant kind. The same word occurs twice in the teaching of Jesus when he describes the tasteless salt which is *“thrown out and trampled under foot”* (Matt. 5:14), and the pearls which swine *“trample them under their feet”* as useless things. This is how these apostates have come to regard Christ Jesus, the priceless treasure of his people.

Philip E. Hughes writes,

He who has trampled under foot the Son of God, has treated the Son of God with utmost contempt. What we trample under foot we regard as completely worthless. To trample the Son of God under foot implies, within the context of our epistle, the sneering rejection of Jesus as the Son in whom God has spoken and enacted his final redeeming word to mankind through whom the world was created, and by who’s powerful word the universe is sustained and carried forward to its predestined end. (1:1-3).

To turn from Christ back to the ineffective animal offerings of the OT is to pour scorn not only on Christ’s person but also on his infinitely costly sacrifice.

2. He has ***“regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant.”*** If the first account of apostasy concerned the divine person of Christ, this one concerns the work of redemption which he accomplished as the incarnate Son. Throughout this epistle the blood of Christ is synonymous with his sacrificial death on the cross, where he offered himself as a propitiatory sacrifice in our place. It is because of the blood of the covenant, the Son’s sacrifice of himself that the fulfilment of the promises of the new covenant announced by the prophets centuries before his appearance, has been accomplished.

Imagine the apostate listening to the gospel, perhaps attending church, partaking of the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ and thereby professing to look to Christ for the washing away of sin. But his faith has been simulated, fake, not genuine, and his secession from the community of believers reveals that, far from thankfully trusting in the blood of Jesus for forgiveness, he has profaned it, or

literally, counted it as common. To put it even more bluntly, Thomas Schreiner states; *“Those who reject Jesus, do not seek purification by his blood. They reject his blood as unclean, tossing it aside as one would throw a menstrual cloth in the garbage.”*

Albert Mohler writes,

Regarding as profane the blood of the covenant, evokes the Old Testament and the respect for holy things in the tabernacle and the temple. To touch any holy object without being purified was to invite instant destruction. Hebrews 10:29 shows treating the blood of the covenant—that is, the blood of the covenant sacrifice, Jesus Christ—like it was profane is even more egregious than denigrating or belittling the holy objects in the temple (see 1 Sam. 2:17). To treat the blood of the covenant as profane essentially means not to believe that the blood of Christ can effect purification for sins. We have already seen the centrality and power of his blood throughout the book of Hebrews and verse 29 is no different. We are told that the blood of the covenant sanctifies us. To disregard Christ’s blood is to spurn the purification it accomplishes.

3. The third offense, ***“insulting the Spirit of grace”*** includes a verb which does not occur anywhere else in the New Testament and means not only outrage but insolence. It is an arrogant rejection of the Spirit in which God’s free favor of grace has come to man. Those who reject the blood of Jesus do not just sin against the Spirit, they insult and despise the Spirit.

John MacArthur writes,

The man who has been led by the Spirit of grace in the pre-salvation work of redemption, and has been energized by Him toward repentance (John 16:8-11), insults the Spirit by turning from Christ. He rejects the gracious work of preparation done by the Spirit in his heart—and that is apostasy.

By trampling under foot the Son of God, the apostate rejects God the Father. *By regarding the blood of the covenant as unclean*, he rejects the Son. *By insulting the gentle, gracious leading of the Spirit*, he rejects the Spirit.

ENDURING MEMORIES

VERSES 32-34: But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, ³³ partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. ³⁴ For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one.

Within the severe warning, is a loving and earnest appeal not to fall away. The near-believing Jews are told to look back on what they had experienced and to look forward to the rewards that would be theirs if they carried through on what they had learned of Christ. Perhaps in recalling past memories the Hebrews will be encouraged and find strength to endure, fully giving their hearts over to the Lord Jesus.

John MacArthur explains,

The writer obviously knew the ones to whom he was writing, or at least knew a great deal about them. He was aware of their deep involvement in the church. They were so closely identified with Christians (becoming sharers) that they even experienced suffering, reproaches, and tribulations because of it. To the world, and certainly to their fellow Jews in the synagogue, they already were Christians. They were not believers, but had already suffered for being considered believers. And at this point that much persecution had not yet driven them out.

These Jews were intellectually enlightened. They knew all the basics of the gospel. But this was no substitute for faith itself. They were well on their way to believing, but they had not believed. So they are told to think of how far they had already come, and what they had already endured, and to complete the process by putting their full trust in Jesus Christ. They are told, in effect, “Remember carefully all the experiences you have had in learning of Christ and being in fellowship with His people. How terrible it would be to fall back now, when you are so close. You mustn’t give up now. How terrible if, after all you have learned of the gospel and all you have suffered and sacrificed for the gospel, you would not receive the real blessing of the gospel—eternal life. You have shown great respect for Christ and great love for His people. Now put your trust in Christ, so

that you can become one of His people.” Like the seed in stony ground, they had endured to a degree, but as the persecution increased they would be offended and fall away (Matt. 13:20-21).

THE FAITH OF THOSE WHO ENDURE

VERSES 35-39: Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. ³⁷ FOR YET IN A VERY LITTLE WHILE, HE WHO IS COMING WILL COME, AND WILL NOT DELAY. ³⁸ BUT MY RIGHTEOUS ONE SHALL LIVE BY FAITH; AND IF HE SHRINKS BACK, MY SOUL HAS NO PLEASURE IN HIM. ³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

The readers are assured that the day of promise will arrive and Jesus will come again. Those who are true believers will trust in him until the end, but those who turn back will not receive God’s favor.

The author reminds the Hebrews, that true Christian confidence has a “**great reward**,” so that to throw away our confidence by abandoning the struggle is also to throw away our reward. That reward is the incomparable glory which awaits all who are faithful to the end, the imperishable, undefiled inheritance reserved in heaven for God’s redeemed people (1 Pet. 1:4), the crown of righteousness which the Lord will bestow on all who love his appearing (2 Tim. 4:8).

The need for “**endurance**” is demonstrated by Habakkuk 2:3-4, which is first quoted and then followed by a comment assuring hearers that their faith is the kind that lasts and leads to life (10:37-39). Dennis Johnson identifies four aspects of faith that appear in the words of Habakkuk: “*Faith (a) acts in light of God’s promises for the future, (b) characterizes those whom God declares “righteous,” (c) does not shrink back, and (d) pleases God.*” We will see all of these illustrated in the stories of the Old Testament believers that follow (11:1-40).

Before learning from and appreciating the faithful examples the author identifies in the next chapter, these believers must be reminded to persevere in the faith. Before they can associate themselves with those listed in chapter 11, they must not to draw away from Christ but endure in confidence to the end. It is with this

final warning that the author reminds all believers to hold true to faith in Jesus Christ.

C.H. Spurgeon on speaking of our confidence in Christ and not “*throwing it away*” states,

It strikes one, at once, on reading the passage — and the best expositors think so too — that there is here an allusion to the Greek soldier with his shield on his arm. When he went out to battle, wearing his shield, which covered him from head to foot, the rule was that he must either come back with his shield or be brought back upon it, but he must never cast it away. Among the Spartans there was a law that any soldier who cast away his shield must die: he was not fit to be a soldier. You remember how one of the old Scriptural songs speaks of the shield of the mighty which was vilely cast away; showing that in the old war times, the casting away of the shield was a disgrace. It was showing the white feather; it was giving up the conflict, and ceasing to hope for safety, much less victory. Our confidence is our shield, and we are not to cast it away, or suffer any to tear it from our arm, but hold it fast until the battle is fought and the victory is won forever.

References:

A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews—Philip Edgcumbe Hughes
Commentary on Hebrews—Thomas Schreiner
Exalting Jesus in Hebrews—Albert Mohler Jr.
Expository Commentary Hebrews-Revelation—Dennis E. Johnson
MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Hebrews—John MacArthur
Shepherds Notes, Hebrews—David Shepherd
The Epistle to the Hebrews—F.F. Bruce
The Message of Hebrews—Raymond Brown