

THE WARNING PASSAGE
OF HEBREWS 10:26-27

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Introduction

Arminians commonly use the warning passage of Hebrews 10:26-27 as a proof text to teach that a believer can lose their salvation. Calvinists on the other hand teach that this passage shows that if a believer continues in some perpetual sin¹ it's a strong indication that they never had salvation to begin with, and should heed the warning of damnation in hellfire that is mentioned² in the passage. Each differs as to the state of the readers, but both share a common view regarding God's judgment. These two³ views have historically shaped people's interpretation of Hebrews 10:26-27.

However, there is another possibility which is the focus this paper. This third option regarding the warning of Hebrews 10:26-27 is consistent with the context, and with the rest of scripture. I will begin by briefly addressing the commonly held views as stated above, address the various Bible translations that have caused confusion, and then provide background and context, and conclude with interpretation and application. The warning passage in question is as follows:

For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. – Hebrews 10:26-27

Hebrews 10 is no doubt a difficult passage⁴ and when read in isolation it does seem to support either of two views mentioned above. However, upon careful exegesis of the passage it can be shown that neither view is what the author intended or implied.

¹ It's interesting to note that no person who holds this view can point to what sin or sins would prove or disprove whether or not one is part of God's family.

² Based on their interpretation of this passage.

³ There is another view, which is a subcategory of Calvinism, which says that the warning passages in Hebrews are hypotheticals. The warnings are real but they couldn't be committed because of their view of perseverance of the saints. Because the hypothetical view creates more problems than it solves, it is this writer's opinion that it has been rejected by most Calvinists and consequently will not be addressed in this paper.

⁴ It's only difficult for those who hold to 'experimental predestination' (see Dillow). If one does not hold to eternal security this verse is less of an issue but that creates more problems than it solves!

Common Interpretations

As noted earlier, common interpretations of the passage have taken one of two positions. The first assumption is that true believers are in view.⁵ This stems from a natural reading of the context, which will be addressed more in-depth later. But to illustrate the viewpoint, McKnight rightly asserts that “the author includes himself in the audience, and uses the first person plural: ‘we’...second he calls them brothers [and holy brothers], ...and at 2:11, 12, 17 when they are identified as those whom Christ has saved.”⁶

The Calvinists on the other hand, maintain that those being warned were never regenerate to begin with. Based on their view of perseverance of the saints, salvation cannot be lost. Piper argues this point; “In Hebrews 3:14 he [the writer] says, “For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end” - meaning that if we do not hold fast to the end, then we “had not become a partaker of Christ.” Failure to persevere in faith is not a sign of losing salvation but of never having been a partaker of Christ.”⁷ Consequently, those in view, who are destined for hell for the sin(s) committed, were never saved to begin with.

Likewise, John MacArthur concurs stating that those in view were “Jews, who understood the gospel, who may have even believed in the truth of the gospel, but had not embraced the gospel. They knew it but were hanging onto their Judaism.”⁸ Therefore they were not true believers, despite the clear rendering of the text.

⁵ Meaning they have placed their faith alone in Christ alone without requiring works either before or after salvation as a means of securing their eternal state.

⁶ Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *Trinity Journal* 13 (1992): 43.

⁷ John Piper, “Woe to Those Who Trample the Son of God.” <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/woe-to-those-who-trample-the-son-of-god>, last accessed March 30, 2014.

⁸ John MacArthur, “Willful Sinning (Hebrews 10)” *MacArthur Commentaries*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huNu9H-8qWU>, last accessed March 31, 2014.

If it is the case that true believers are in view, the Arminian would suggest that the believer can lose their salvation; God will reject the subjects in question because they have rejected Christ. This is derived from the interpretation of the judgment noted in the various warnings, including the warning in question.

This leads to the second assumption, which proves to be common ground between Arminians and Calvinists. This assumption is that the fire and judgment spoken of throughout Hebrews are metaphors and/or phrases that, according to them, clearly imply eternal damnation. Scot McKnight emphatically states,

“The language of 10:26-31 is particularly clear and needs to be decisive evidence if other images and expression remain ambiguous. Nonetheless, when the exegete ties together “no escape” (2:2, 12:25), God’s anger (3:10, 17), falling short of the rest, ... a condition where no sacrifice remains for someone (10:26), death without mercy (10:28) ... one is forced to conclude that the author is presenting eternal damnation.”⁹

Likewise John Piper remarks on the state of those in question in Hebrews saying that “the warnings are not that we might forfeit a few heavenly rewards, but that we might forfeit our souls in the fury of God's wrath.”¹⁰ In other words, those apostates are damned to hellfire. John MacArthur would agree, as he views Hebrews from an evangelistic perspective to the lost who are pretending to be believers; “Here's the warning. And what the writer says is...Folks, if you don't come to Christ and you fall away, you're forever damned.”¹¹ Fallacious logic¹² aside, the point MacArthur is making is that he believes the warning passages in Hebrews deal with eternal damnation.

⁹ McKnight, 34. (Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.)

¹⁰ John Piper, “Woe to Those Who Trample The Son of God.” <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/woe-to-those-who-trample-the-son-of-god>. (last accessed March 30, 2014).

¹¹ John MacArthur, “A Warning to Pretenders.” <http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/80-219/a-warning-to-pretenders>. (last accessed March 30, 2014).

¹² MacArthur’s appeal begs the question; How can one fall away from something they were never a part of?

So not only do various theologians have varying opinions that create confusion, but some of the Bible translations have added fuel to the fire.¹³

Bible Translations

There are several translations that add additional words and imply meaning to the text that is simply not there. Intentional or not, these translations do not help clarify the difficult passage. The problem lies in verse 26 in explaining the present participle in use:

ESV: **For if we go on *sinning*** deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins¹⁴ [emphasis mine]

NKJV: **For if we *sin willfully*** after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins¹⁵ [emphasis mine]

Koine Greek : Ἐκουσιως γὰρ ἁμαρτανόντων ἡμῶν μετὰ λαβεῖν τὴν ἐπίγνωσιν τῆς ἀληθείας, οὐκέτι περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν ἀπολείπεται θυσία¹⁶

The word in question is the Greek word ἁμαρτανόντων which is a present tense participle. The ESV and NKJV render the words with the phrase “go on sinning” or as in the case of the NIV “keep on sinning.” These translations seem to imply that the sin that is in view is some type of perpetual sin that a person is not dealing with properly before God. In the case of the NKJV it’s simply translated as “sin”, which is an appropriate rendering. Since in English we often think of present participles as a continuing action, the translators of the NIV and others chose to add the additional phrase “keep on” and “go on.” This is an attempt to render the nature of a participle.

¹³ No pun intended.

¹⁴ English Standard Version; see also NASB and NIV.

¹⁵ New King James Version: see also KJV and HCSB.

¹⁶ Teknia Greek Font; *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Byzantine Textform 2005, with Morphology*. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2006).

However, the present aspect denotes action in progress not necessarily one that is continuous. Reading more into the participle than what is there does the author an injustice. This is where context is key and helps determine the true intent of the writer. The writer of Hebrews repeats himself with respect to the warnings, not to abandon Christ; for example, Hebrews 3:12 – “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God;”¹⁷ Apostasy is the particular sin in mind. “So, whatever you do with the syntax of the present participle, it has to revolve around that one particular sin.”¹⁸ Dr. Bing agrees noting that,

The author of Hebrews apparently has a particular sin in mind, which becomes evident as we consult the context. He had exhorted his readers previously to hold fast to their confession (3:6; 4:14) and has warned them about the dangers of not pressing on in their faith.¹⁹

This is critical because the Greek both grammatically and in context, does not support a common misinterpretation that perpetual sin is what is being warned against. Dr. Constable also agrees that the willful sin that is in view is a specific sin. “Willful sin in the context of Hebrews is deliberate apostasy, turning away from God (2:1; 3:12; 6:4-8).”²⁰ Furthermore the incorrect phrasing neglects the reference back to the Old Testament²¹ which the author of Hebrews was using to make his point and which the readers would have been very familiar with. This point will be examined in more detail later. This now leads to the context of the passage which will help clarify the true nature of the warning.

The Readers Spiritual State and Predicament

The real crux of explaining Hebrews 10 (and the other passages) not only lies in the context but the target audience. Are these believers or unbelievers? Hebrews was written by an

¹⁷ See also Heb. 2:1-4; 10:19-39; 12:1-4.

¹⁸ Personal conversation with Dr. Tom Eckman, Former Professor Grace School of Theology (April 1, 2014).

¹⁹ Dr. Charlie Bing, “Can the Willful sin of Hebrews 10:26 be forgiven?” GraceNotes. <http://www.gracelife.org/resources/gracenotes/?id=45> (last accessed March 31, 2014).

²⁰ Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Hebrews* (Dallas, Texas: Sonic Light, 2004), 55.

²¹ Specifically Number 15 and it too was dealing with a very specific type of sin.

unknown author²² and was directed towards a group of unknown Jewish believers who were obviously familiar with the law. Dr. Fruchtenbaum agrees and makes the case that “they were Jewish believers, because only these would be in danger of going back into Judaism....[and] the author uses terminology which could only be true of believers.”²³ The author refers to his target audience as brothers, a term used exclusively in scripture for those who are saved; e.g. holy brethren (3:1), brethren (3:12, 10:19, 13:22), and beloved (6:9). In addition, verse 5:12 states “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.” Why would the writer tell unbelievers that they should be teachers by now? The writer would only make this statement if they were already believers. Thus, it is clear that believers are in view, specifically immature ones in need of the milk of the word.

Furthermore, as seen in the passage in question, to reiterate the words of McKnight, the phrase “we [ἡμῶν] have received” is first person plural indicating that the author is including himself.²⁴ Are we to assume the author is not truly born again? It’s clear then that the people in view are Jewish believers, to suggest otherwise stretches credulity and highly suggests eisegesis of one’s theology.

The state of the readers and to those who have decided to return to Judaism is also clearly indicated. The timeframe was 60 AD during the height of Nero’s reign,²⁵ as an Emperor of Rome he had Christians fed to the lions for sport and used them as human torches to keep his garden parties lit at night.²⁶ Dr. Fruchtenbaum states the following: “Jewish believers were

²² Most likely not Paul, as Paul didn’t receive the message of Christ second-hand. (Heb. 2:3)

²³ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum. *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*. (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries Publishing, 2001). 591.

²⁴ The writer does this routinely, see also 6:1, “let us”.

²⁵ The narcissistic Roman Emperor who ruled Rome from 54 to 68 AD.

²⁶ Well documented throughout historical texts.

experiencing tremendous persecution and were seriously contemplating going back into Judaism, at least temporarily, until the persecution subsided.”²⁷ The writer was dealing with Jewish believers who wanted to return to the law system to avoid persecution. The writer’s desire then is three-fold;²⁸ deal with apostasy (2:1-4; 10:19-25), provide encouragement to grow spiritually (5:11-14; 10:32-39), and to provide words of comfort and truth during their time of duress (11:1-12:3). To deal with this the writer emphasizes the superiority of Christ over all the law, over Moses, over the order of Melchizedek, over the continual sacrifices. He also gives them five dire warnings, the fourth of which is the passage in view.

Warnings to the Readers

All of these warnings are given to the same people. The first is the danger of drifting (2:1-4), the second is an admonition against disobedience (3:7-19), the third is to exhort them to maturity (5:11-6:20), the fourth is a warning against purposefully sinning (in this case, leaving the faith for Judaism) (10:26-31), and the fifth, to guard against indifference to Christ (12:25-29).²⁹ All the warnings follow the same four-part form; the subjects, the sin, the exhortation, and the consequences. Time does not permit an exegesis of the other four warnings, but it’s important to note that they all tie together and should be interpreted consistently with each other. Point being, what is discussed regarding the fourth warning is directly applicable to the other four, and vice versa, e.g. the subjects and the sin in view.³⁰

Interpretation and Application

At this point, the context and setting are clear. Earlier the point was made that the ‘purposeful sin’ that was in view was apostasy, a turning away from faith in Christ. The same as

²⁷ Fruchtenbaum, 951.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ For well laid out explanations of these, read Dr. Fruchtenbaum’s work on Israelology listed in the Bibliography.

³⁰ One could argue that each warning should be taken in isolation from the others, but that argument has weak to no support as there’s nothing to indicate that the writer shifts to another audience or sin.

in Heb. 2:1; 3:12; 6:6 and 12:25. It's also made clearer with the postpositive γὰρ in the greek. The "For" (γὰρ) in verse 26 could also be translated as "because," which ties back to verse 23 which states "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful." ... *because*, if we don't hold fast and we willfully reject Christ, we'll experience God's judgment as his children. Again, it becomes even clearer that the sin that is in view is the rejection of Christ for something lesser. It should also be noted that it's not apostasy towards Judaism, it's apostasy from Christ. Christ who is the final and only saving sacrifice. The authors concern and focus is on the devaluation of Christ. So the relevance of this book and warnings stands today. It just so happens that for some of the readers, the way prior was Judaism.

Continuing, to paraphrase verse 26, the writer warns "Because if we [which includes the author] purposefully choose to reject Christ [apostate], there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins." The phrase "sin willfully", as was alluded to earlier "suggests a connection with ... sin of a high hand"³¹ spoken of in Numbers 15:30-31 which says the following.

'But the person who does anything **presumptuously**, whether he is native-born or a stranger, that one brings reproach on the Lord, and he **shall be cut off** [put to death] from among his people. 31 Because he has despised the word of the Lord, and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; **his guilt shall be upon him.**'" [emphasis mine]

Understanding that presumptuous sins had no sacrifice is critical to understanding the text at hand. The Law of Moses had sacrifices for any number of sins, which are outlined in Leviticus, and with them came various types of sacrifices and ritual cleansings that had to be undertaken in order to have the specific sin atoned for.³² But if the sin was presumptuous, a.k.a.

³¹ J. Paul Tanner and Robert N. Wilkin ed., *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, Volume 2. (Denton:2010), 1074.

³² Note atonement is a covering, not a payment for. The sacrificial system was temporary, and was never meant to pay for sins – "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins." – Heb. 10:4

done intentionally, there was no sacrifice; the individual was now under the direct judgment of God Almighty.³³

It's also important to point out that in Numbers 15:27 Moses describes unintentional sins. Tanner notes that "Moses used the combination of *hekousios* (an antonym of *hekousios*) And *hamartano* ("to sin") in Num 15:27 to describe the concept of "sinning unintentionally," implying that the opposite idea ("to sin intentionally") would be expressed by *hekousios* and *hamartano* – which is exactly what the author of Hebrews does."³⁴ As Tanner rightly observes this further emphasizes the point made earlier, that perpetual sin is not in view, it was a specific sin that brought physical death.

This is why the writer of Hebrews states that "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins ...but a fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries." – Heb. 10:27. The readers of this would have been well acquainted with the Levitical law stated, and would have known that physical death was the punishment. The strong language, judgment and fiery indignation, is a picture of a Jealous God who is forced, because of His Holiness, to deal with his children severely (Heb. 12:6).

In addition, because believers are in view, and because we know believers are held secure by the power and promises of God (John 10:28); the judgment in view cannot be the great white throne; and fiery indignation cannot be discussing hell. In fact, noticeably absent in all the warnings is hell, or Gehenna.

There seems to be a tendency among Christians that God's love will override his justice and holiness in dealing with His people. However, there are many examples where God

³³ This cannot be understated as this is exactly what the writer of Hebrews was referencing back to. In preparation for this paper I found it interesting that what I came across (albeit not exhaustive), none of the prominent Calvinists and Arminians made mention of this fact, let alone pull up any Old Testament for context.

³⁴ Tanner, 1074.

dealt with His people severely at times; “So the fire of the Lord burned among them [Israelites]” -Num. 11:1-3.³⁵ And in the New Testament, Ananias and Sapphira were instantly put to death for their sin (Acts 5:1-11). And all too often, Christians immediately think of fire and/or judgment in anger as speaking of hell.³⁶ This would be akin to believing that every time blood was spoken of in scripture, it was Christ’s blood. It’s important to point out that Christians will be judged (see Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:11-15; 2 Cor. 5:10), this may or may not be a time of rejoicing for that individual at the Judgment Seat of Christ. The indignation spoken of the Greek word ζελος, which is often translated as ‘zeal’. Thus the phrase ‘fiery indignation’ could be thought of as ‘fervent zeal’;³⁷ not for eternal condemnation but for bringing a sinner to repentance. And this is an expression of God’s love since he, “scourges those he loves and he chastises every child receives.”

Conclusion and Application

In conclusion, Hebrews 10:26-27 is not a warning against loss of salvation; neither is it discussing unbelievers, hellfire, and persistent sin. To interpret the passage in this manner would at the least result in inconsistencies with other passages and at worst result in loss of assurance of salvation. What is seen, were believers that were leaving Christ for Judaism to avoid persecution. While they may have thought persecution from man was bad, the writer makes them well aware in this warning that God dealing with them could be just as bad or more severe. The writer is imploring them to recognize the significance and the power of Christ in their lives and attempting to motivate them to grow to maturity. The application for us today is threefold; The first is that Christ is better than anything and worthy of our worship; He’s the only

³⁵ See also Isa. 9:19; 10:17; 29:6; 42:25; Jer. 11:16; 15:14; 17:4; Lam. 2:3-4; 4:11; Eze. 22:20-22; Amos 2:5; Obad. 18; Ps. 78:21; 80:16.

³⁶ The Holy Spirit might take issue with that as He guided the Israelites as a ball of fire.

³⁷ For further information visit GraceLife and article entitle “Hebrews on Fire” - <http://www.gracelife.org/resources/gracenotes/?id=34> (last accessed, March 31 2014)

one that can save, He's the only one that can progressively sanctify us. The second is that judgment (temporal) for believers is real both in the present and in the future. And lastly, God is a God of love and security who cares enough to discipline His children. Interpreting the passage in this manner makes the passage clear and easy to understand; it is consistent with the plain reading of the context, the obvious state of the readers, and the rest of scripture. As the writer of Hebrews says:

let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. – Heb. 12:1-2

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