
The Warning Passages in Hebrews
Part 4 (of 5 parts):

The Danger of Willful Sin in Hebrews 10:26-39

Thomas Kem Oberholtzer

Pastor

Victoria Bible Church, Victoria, Texas

Hebrews 10:26-39 is the fourth warning passage in this epistle. The severity and intensity in this caveat are greater than in the previous three. It focuses on the topics of willful sin, consuming fire, and shrinking back to destruction. The passage contains important present and eschatological instructions for the addressees.

The Relationship of Hebrews 10:26-39 to 10:19-25

Hebrews 7:1-10:18 forms the key doctrinal section of the epistle.¹ Chapter 7 affirms the superiority of the priesthood of Christ to that of Aaron. Hebrews 8:1-9:15 delineates the superior priestly service of Jesus, and 9:16-28 explains the necessity of the Son's sacrifice. The final division of this main doctrinal exposition is 10:1-18, which presents the results of the superior sacrifice for the New Covenant worshipers. The section then merges into the fourth warning, "Now where there is forgiveness of these things there is no longer any offering for sin" (10:18).

The immediate context of the admonition is 10:19-25. A transition from the previous doctrinal section is seen in verse 19 in the conjunction *οὖν* ("therefore").² The readers are again referred to as

¹ Leon Morris, "Hebrews," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelcin, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982-), 12:103.

² Henry Alford, *Alford's Greek Testament*, 4 vols. (reprint, Chicago: Moody Press,

ἀδελφοί ("brethren"), pointing to the fact that they are related to the New Covenant blood, that is, they are believers. They were to have confidence to enter the very presence of God, the ἁγίωσιν ("holy place"), through the blood of Christ. Through the blood of Christ the Christian obtains confidence.³

In the Old Testament tabernacle the veil separated the holy of holies from the holy place. The veil barred all the priests (except the high priest) and all the people from access to God's presence in the holy of holies. The veil was a symbol of Christ's flesh.⁴ When He died on the cross, the veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45), symbolizing that through His death the New Covenant readers had direct access to God.

Hebrews 10:21 speaks of Jesus as the believer's "great priest" who is presently presiding ἐπὶ τοῦ οἴκου ("over the house of God"). The "house of God" is the priestly arrangement previously described in 3:1-6.⁵ The Son functions in His priestly role over the house where individual believer-priest worship occurs.

Because of their New Covenant blood relationship and worship, the readers were encouraged to do four things: (1) draw near (10:22); (2) hold fast their confession (10:23); (3) consider how to stimulate one another (10:24); and (4) not forsake their assembling together (10:25). The phrase καθὼς ἔθος τισίν ("as is the habit of some," v. 25) indicates there had been a defection on the part of certain members.⁶

The readers were exhorted to "encourage one another" as "the day" draws near. The same principle had been stated in 3:13 as a means of helping prevent the development of a hard heart. The term τὴν ἡμέραν ("the day") gives a definite eschatological perspective to the warning. Buchanan writes, "The longing for 'the day' when the enemy would be driven from the land, taxation removed, and Israel given a position of status among the nations under the leadership of her own King was a common Christian and Jewish eschatological expectation."⁷

The imminency of "the day" is stressed throughout the New

1976), 4:194.

³ C. Spicq, *L'épître aux Hébreux*, 2 vols. (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1952), 2:315.

⁴ Hans Windisch, *Der Hebräerbrief* (Tübingen: Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr, 1931), p. 93.

⁵ For a discussion of the "house of God" in Hebrews 3:1-6 see "The Kingdom Rest in Hebrews 3:1-4:13," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (April-June 1988): 185-96.

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 255.

⁷ George Wesley Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1972), pp. 169-70.

Testament. A dispensational, pretribulational, premillennial theology of "the day" includes the rapture of the church (1 Thess. 4:13-18); the seven-year tribulation period (Dan. 9:24-27; Matt. 24:1-31); the Second Advent of Christ along with the inauguration of His millennial kingdom (Matt. 24:32-25:46; Rev. 20:1-6); and the great white throne judgment (Rev. 20:11-15), which culminates with the ushering in of eternity. Since that "day" might have begun at any moment, the readers needed to encourage each other daily.

The Warning of Hebrews 10:26-39

HEBREWS 10:26-31

Most commentators recognize the similarities between the warnings in Hebrews 6 and 10.⁸ Both passages deal with apostasy, but the tone of the caveat in chapter 10 is more severe than in chapter 6.

The warning opens with the connective *γάρ* ("for"), indicating that the same readers were in view as in 10:19-25—the New Covenant people.

The author continued with a genitive absolute construction, "If we go on sinning willfully."⁹ Those choosing to sin do so voluntarily. The writer included himself in the warning by using the pronoun *ἡμῶν* ("we"). He understood himself as one of the "brethren" mentioned in verse 19:

This warning is addressed to "brethren"; to those whose welcome entry to the Holiest has been discovered to us. They are in danger of letting go the faith and hope, on which present acceptance and future glory depend. . . . Yet listen to some commentators . . . "It is directed to professors' only. Hence, if you know yourself sincere, it is not meant for you. Pass on!"

Was it for "professors"? Methinks, had there been originally any such in the Churches of Jerusalem or Judea they had taken flight long before. Wild ducks wing as soon as they hear the fowlers' first shot.¹⁰

Willful sin is illustrated in Numbers 15:30-31. For intentional sin there was no sacrifice available. Instead intentional sinners faced the temporal judgment of being cut off from the covenant people and of the possibility of death at the hand of Yahweh (Lev.

⁸ Neil R. Lightfoot, *Jesus Christ Today: A Commentary on the Book of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), p. 193.

⁹ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), 5:413.

¹⁰ Robert Govett, *Govett on Hebrews* (Miami Springs, FL: Conley & Schoettle Publishing Co., 1981), p. 354.

17:4, 9; Num. 9:13; 15:30-36).¹¹ Under the Mosaic Covenant the penalty for deliberate sin was loss of physical life. Soteriology is not the issue in Numbers 15; the issue is temporal discipline for violating the Mosaic Covenant.

Willful sin committed *μετὰ τὸ λαβεῖν τὴν ἐπίγνωσιν τῆς ἀληθείας* ("after receiving the full-knowledge of the truth") results in no sacrifice for sins. The author paralleled his New Testament warning with the Old Testament principle: no sacrifice is available for willful disobedience to the will of God revealed in His Word.

What does "willful sin" refer to? Contextually it seems to refer to "holding fast the confession" and "not forsaking the assembling" (10:23, 25). These themes occur throughout the epistle (Heb. 3:6, 12, 14; 4:14; 6:11; 10:23). The writer was concerned that some of the readers might abandon their confidence and assembling together. Historically this would mean an alignment with a sectarian form of Judaism.¹² Withdrawing from the assembling together meant removing oneself from the only true means for daily forgiveness of sin, the blood of Christ. The loss is not salvation but the loss of the means by which we can have daily cleansing of sin (1 John 1:9). For believers to align themselves with sectarian Judaism is the equivalent of aligning with a dead, obsolete sacrificial system, which is powerless to cleanse one's sin (Heb. 8:13; 10:1-18).

Not assembling with the community of New Covenant believers would result in an expectation of judgment (10:27). A believer who identifies himself with the enemies of God has only a fear of judgment to anticipate.

The judgment has an internal subjective element, since it results in *φοβερὰ δὲ τις ἐκδοχή* ("a certain terrifying expectation"). It also has an external objective sense in which God's jealousy will consume His adversaries.

The metaphor of fire, employed in 10:27 (cf. 6:8), is identified by some scholars as a reference to the fire of hell.¹³ Since the addressees are "brethren" (i.e., believers), this cannot be loss in hell,

¹¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. 131.

¹² For a discussion on the background of the epistle and parallels with Qumran see Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), pp. 10-11; Spicq, *L'épître aux Hébreux*, 1:242 ff.; Jean-Baptiste Apollos, "Les Hellenistes et Qumran," *Revue de Qumran* 1 (1958-59): 365-90; Yigael Yadin, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, vol. 4 of *Aspects of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Chaim Rabin and Yigael Yadin (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1965), pp. 36-55.

¹³ Homer A. Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), p. 205.

for the believer's eternal destiny is certain from the moment of salvation (John 5:24; 10:27-30; Eph. 1; 1 John 5:13). There is nothing in the context to indicate the writer has shifted to the soteriological topic of eternal damnation.

It is preferable to view the metaphor of fire against the background of the Old Testament, where Yahweh's anger toward His failing covenant people is described by the metaphor of fire (Isa. 9:18-19; 10:17). Those who forsake the assembling must now await the discipline of the Lord (Heb. 12:5-11). They have willfully chosen to so live that they will be disciplined from the Lord.

Hebrews 10:28 employs an argument from the lesser to the greater. Those who violated the Old Covenant experienced discipline; therefore how much greater should discipline be for those who willfully sin against the New Covenant. The writer gave three reasons why this willful defection deserves greater judgment. The defecting individuals had (a) trampled under foot the Son of God, (b) regarded unclean the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and (c) insulted the Spirit of grace (10:29).

The word *καταπατήσας* ("trampled under foot") means to treat with contempt of the most flagrant kind.¹⁴ By aligning themselves with sectarian Judaism they treated with contempt the Son of God.

Also they had regarded as *κοινόν* ("common") the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified. They considered the blood profane because they viewed it as no different from the blood of any other person.¹⁵ They considered commonplace the blood of Christ, which forms the basis of the New Covenant. And yet the blood of Christ is the means by which the defecting individual was sanctified (*ἐν ᾧ ἡγιάσθη*). Hebrews 10:10 and 14 refer to the sacrifice of Christ by which the readers had been sanctified. The writer's point is that willful sin by "blood-bought" believers is an extremely serious matter. The defectors were regenerated individuals.

The defectors were also disciplined because they had *ἐνυβρίσας* ("insulted") the Spirit of grace. This verb suggests treating with "utter contempt."¹⁶ This insulting the Spirit was an insult against the work of the Holy Spirit, whose gifts had been manifested among the readers, according to 2:4. Dunham writes of this threefold rejection by the believer: "Is the sin of a blood-bought believer less in-

¹⁴ James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924), p. 151.

¹⁵ Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1966), p. 236.

¹⁶ Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, ed. Cleon Rogers, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), p. 704.

sulting or outrageous to God than the grossest unbeliever? It is not. It is far more serious. A child insulting his father is more wounding than a neighbor child insulting the same man."¹⁷

Hebrews 10:30 establishes the principle of God's justice in relation to unfaithfulness. Quoting from the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32, the writer to the Hebrews pointed out that the enemies of Yahweh were repaid by His vengeance (Deut. 32:35). Thompson writes concerning the use of Deuteronomy 32:35 in Hebrews 10:30:

In the original context vengeance (judgment) of God was directed against Israel's enemies, who reaped what they had sown. But God's own people were not exempt from this law and should expect to reap judgment where they had "profaned" the blood of the covenant by which (they were) sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace (Heb. 10:29).¹⁸

Disobedience on the part of God's people may result in temporal physical discipline (cf. Heb. 12:4-11).

The second half of Hebrews 10:30 cites Deuteronomy 32:36. The verb *κρίνω* ("to judge") in the Septuagint translates the Hebrew term *נָקַם* ("to vindicate").¹⁹ The same Hebrew word is used in Psalm 110:6, where the messianic King is said to execute judgment on the enemies of Israel. The writer's point is lucid—defection by a believer puts him in a position similar to that of an enemy. Temporal discipline in the present is a real possibility.

Hebrews 10:31 develops the concept of temporal discipline described in verse 30. The phrase *θεοῦ ζῶντος* ("living God") had been used in 3:12 to urge the readers to hold fast their confidence. The willful sin mentioned in 10:26 may result in temporal discipline from the one and only living God.

HEBREWES 10:32-34

In this call to encouragement, the readers were admonished to recall past actions as a motive for future endurance. The writer mentioned their earlier persecutions and their ability to rejoice in the midst of trials. Verse 32 uses *ὑπομένω* ("to endure") of present endurance, and verse 36 uses it with an eschatological perspective.

Verses 33-34 mention a variety of difficult situations the readers had endured, including public shame, imprisonment, and loss of prop-

¹⁷ Duane A. Dunham, "An Exegetical Examination of the Warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews" (ThD diss., Grace Theological Seminary, July 1974), p. 210.

¹⁸ J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), pp. 502-3.

¹⁹ Edwin Hatch and Henry Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint*, 2 vols. (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 2:787.

erty. They had undergone these experiences "with joy," knowing they had "a better possession and an abiding one." The loss of temporal possessions was insignificant in light of the assurance of possessing heavenly treasures. From the beginning of their faith in Christ, the readers understood the need to endure to receive eschatological possessions.

HEBREWS 10:35-39

The author moved from the readers' past endurance of persecutions to their present persecutions with the term *οὖν* ("therefore"). They were encouraged not to throw away their confidence, which will result in *μεγάλην μισθαποδοσίαν* ("a great reward"). The "great reward" is the eschatological possession mentioned in verse 34.

Verse 36, which could be a summary statement for the epistle, exhorts the readers to endure their trials patiently and not abandon their assembling together (cf. v. 25). If the readers endured, they would accomplish God's will and receive His promise of blessing. The author's use of *ἵνα τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ ποιήσαντες* indicates that receiving the promise depends on endurance. Because of the conditional nature of perseverance, it is apparent that eternal salvation is not the topic, for eternal salvation does not depend on persevering in work (Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5-7). In Hebrews the "promise" refers to a variety of subjects: entrance into rest (Heb. 4:1); inheritance of the promises related to Abraham (6:12-13); eternal inheritance (9:15); a land (11:9, 11); and future reward (10:34-36; 11:13, 39). Each of these has an eschatological sense and is conditioned on persevering in obedience to the will of God.

The writer drove his point home by a free citation of Isaiah 26:20 and Habakkuk 2:3-4 from the Septuagint. He wanted to be sure the readers understood the eschatological ramifications of their present endurance in obedience to the will of God.

The first phrase in Hebrews 10:37—*μικρὸν ὅσον ὅσον* ("in a very little while")—is from Isaiah 26:20 (Septuagint), an eschatological text, which is a part of "Isaiah's little apocalypse."²⁰ Isaiah 26:20 relates to the day of the Lord, the tribulation period, during which Israel will find safety "for a little while" until the Lord's wrath is accomplished (Dan. 9:24-27; Jer. 30:7). The writer to the Hebrews then quoted from Habakkuk 2:3-4 to link the Isaiah 26:20 phrase "in a very little while" with the Second Advent of Christ. The Second Advent of the Messiah will occur after the seven-year period of Jacob's trouble. The point in quoting Isaiah 26:20 was to encourage the

²⁰ Alfred Martin and John A. Martin, *Isaiah: The Glory of Messiah* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), p. 81.

audience not to allow the difficulty of their persecutions, the "very little while," to cause them to forfeit their heavenly rewards or eschatological possessions.²¹

The author's citation of Habakkuk 2:3-4 from the Septuagint has a number of significant changes. These revisions were applied to his readers' present situation. The first change is the addition of a definite article: "the coming one" not "a coming one." The reference to Messiah's return is crystal clear. The second change the writer made was to reverse the order of the clauses to place at the close of the citation the words that refer to shrinking back. The inversion is illustrated as follows:

Habakkuk 2:3-4

*Ἐὰν ὑποστείληται, οὐκ εὐδοκεῖ
ἡ ψυχὴ μου ἐν αὐτῷ
ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεώς μου
ζήσεται.*

Hebrews 10:38

*ὁ δὲ δίκαιός μου ἐκ πίστεως
ζήσεται,
καὶ ἐὰν ὑποστείληται, οὐκ
εὐδοκεῖ ἡ ψυχὴ μου ἐν αὐτῷ.*

In Hebrews 10:38 the subject of shrinking back is clearly "My righteous one," that is, a believer. "Shrinking back" in this situation meant failure to hold fast, abandonment of the assembly, loss of confidence, and failure to endure.

Habakkuk 2:3-4 describes the people of Yahweh as anticipating the deliverance of the Lord and destruction of their enemies, the Babylonians. In the midst of this difficult situation, the righteous are called to live by faith while awaiting deliverance from the Lord.

The author of Hebrews applied the passage to his readers by referring to the imminent return of Messiah, His defeat of and their deliverance from their enemies, and their participation in ruling as *μέτοχοι* ("partners") with the King. The readers were assured of the return of the Messiah, who would deliver them from their enemies—*ὁ ἐρχόμενος ἴψει καὶ οὐ χρονίσει* ("He who is coming will come, and will not delay"; cf. 1:13-14; 10:37; Ps. 110:1-2, 5-7). In their present persecutions (Heb. 10:32-36) the readers of Hebrews, like Habakkuk's audience, were enjoined to "live by faith" in light of Messiah's coming deliverance. The eschatological deliverance for the readers of Hebrews will begin with the rapture of the church and be consummated at the Second Advent of Messiah and the inauguration of His millennial kingdom.

The writer moved from the eschatological perspective of verses 37-38 to his present situation in verse 39. His use of *ἡμεῖς* ("we") in

²¹ Morris, "Hebrews," p. 111.

verse 39 is emphatic as seen in the change from the second person plural "you" in verse 36. The author was expressing his confidence that neither the readers nor he would abandon their present confidence.

The term *ἀπώλεια* ("destruction") used in verse 39 has been understood by some as eternal destruction.²² However, this is only one of many uses of that word. Hatch and Redpath cite 111 uses of the term in the Septuagint, as a translation of 21 Hebrew words.²³ One meaning is desolation (Ezek. 32:15) and another is physical death (Esth. 7:4). Based on the previous warnings and the immediate context of Hebrews 10:26-38 it seems best to understand *ἀπώλεια* ("destruction") in verse 39 as referring to temporal physical discipline (cf. 3:1-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:27-31; 12:4-11).²⁴

The writer reassured his readers that they were of those who have faith to the "preserving of the soul." The word *ψυχή* ("soul") may have at least six different meanings,²⁵ one of which is earthly or physical life. The phrase was used in classical Greek as the equivalent of "saving the life."²⁶ This meaning agrees well with the exposition of 10:32-39. The readers were to live by faith in the midst of difficult times. The result of obedience to the Word of God would be a life-preserving walk instead of temporal discipline, the loss of physical life.

The caveat seems to refer to the possibility of temporal discipline for those who willfully sin. Hebrews 11 serves as an encouragement to those who patiently endured in spite of a variety of difficult life situations. In Hebrews 12 the topic of discipline resurfaces. Failure to endure may result in temporal discipline and loss of blessing eschatologically in the millennium.

Conclusion

The warning in Hebrews 10:26-39 has a severe and ominous tone. The readers are called to live in obedience to the will of God in a

²² Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 215.

²³ Hatch and Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint*, p. 151.

²⁴ Zane C. Hodges, "Hebrews," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, 2 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, SP Publications, 1983, 1985), 2:807.

²⁵ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 901.

²⁶ Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 158.

number of areas—drawing near to their High Priest, holding fast their confession, considering how to stimulate each other to love and good deeds, and not forsaking assembling together (10:22-25). These exhortations are given in light of the imminency of the eschatological "day" (i.e., the return of the Messiah).

From this background the warning is given to avoid "willful sin" (i.e., abandoning their assembling and Christian confidence). Sinning willfully results in being in a position in which experiential forgiveness of sin is no longer possible. The result of this position is an expectation of temporal discipline on the defecting believer.

The antidote against willful sin is to recall former days of endurance and future eschatological rewards for obedience. Their past confidence in future possessions was the key for enduring their present difficult situation. Present perseverance will result in receiving God's future rewards.

The author closed this warning passage with a free citation of Isaiah 26:20 and Habakkuk 2:3-4 to emphasize the need to persevere in view of the coming of the millennium. The writer warned his readers not to "shrink back to destruction" (i.e., temporal physical discipline) as some seem to have done. He closed with a note of encouragement that his readers were those who walk by faith with a life-preserving quality.