

God's Glory in God's Word

Hebrews Warning Passages and the Perseverance of the Saints

For many who declare "once saved, always saved", the letter to the Hebrews presents significant challenges. While the overall theme of the letter is the superiority of Christ, there are severe warnings directly related to Christ's superiority.

For example, from Hebrews 2:

Therefore, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? (Heb 2:1-3a)

Angels delivered the law (Deut 33:2; Acts 7:52-53; Gal 3:19). And those who disobeyed were rightly punished. Now we have one far superior to the angels whose message far surpasses the one that brought "just retribution" in response to disobedience. The rhetorical question assumes that if someone disobeys His message, **there is no escape**. Other warning passages affirm the same thing. The key "warning" passages in Hebrews include: 2:1-4, 3:7 – 4:13, 5:11 – 6:12, 10:19-39, and 12:14-29. Consider just a few statements from these passages:

*For it is **impossible (i.e. no escape)**, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned. (Heb 6:4-8)*

*For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment (**i.e. no escape**), and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged 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. (**i.e. no escape**) (Heb 10:26-31)*

*For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven (**i.e. no escape**). (Heb 12:18-25)*

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of

spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.(i.e. no escape) (Heb 4:11-13)

Many who would declare “once saved, always saved” do not understand what it truly means. And that is also true of many who reject the phrase. Based on my personal interactions with those who reject the phrase, what they are rejecting is the misunderstood notion – one that assumes walking an aisle, signing a commitment card, raising your hand, or any other false notions of “getting saved” results in sort of a “Get Out of Hell Free” card. I can pray a prayer, live however I want, and go to Heaven. NO!

But for those with a **correct** understanding of once saved, always saved – or the perseverance of the saints – there is no struggle with these passages. We should not reject the idea that church members **can and do** “neglect such a great salvation”, “fall away” and “go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth”. Jesus taught this in several places:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.' "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. (Mat 7:21-24)

Note that verse 23 leads directly into the famous comparison of the wise man who built his house upon the rock. What's the difference between the wise man and the foolish man? Not the hearing, but the doing of Jesus' words. In the parallel passage in Luke 6, Jesus asks the question: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you? (Luk 6:46)

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, (Joh 8:31)

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35)

Consider that all of this is consistent with the teaching in the letter to the Hebrews. Consider the verses immediately preceding or following the warning passages:

Immediately preceding the Hebrews 6 warning passage:

Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits. (Heb 6:1-3)

Immediately preceding the Hebrews 10 warning passage:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Heb 10:23-25)

Immediately preceding the Hebrews 12 warning passage:

And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly

fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. (Heb 12:5-17)

Immediately preceding the Hebrews 4 warning passage:

*Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, **let us hold fast our confession.** For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. **Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace,** that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb 4:14-16)*

Once Saved, Always Saved – i.e. the Perseverance of the Saints is summed up in Hebrews 3:14:

*For we have come to share in Christ, **if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.***

And is demonstrated in how the writer of Hebrews refers to his readers:

*Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things--things that belong to salvation. For God is **not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints,** as you still do. And we desire each one of you **to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end,** so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. (Heb 6:9-12)*

A summary of two chapters in the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith will explain how one can hold to "Once Saved, Always Saved", yet make the statement "church members can and do "neglect such a great salvation", "fall away" and "go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth".

Summary of Chapter 17 on Perseverance of the Saints

1. Paragraph 1: Perseverance is a gift belonging to God's elect.
2. Paragraph 2: The guarantee of perseverance is **not** based on free will, but instead is based on:
 - a. **efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ and union with him**
 - b. **the oath of God,**
 - c. **the abiding of his Spirit**
 - d. **the seed of God within them**
 - e. **the nature of the covenant of grace.**
3. **The elect will sin – possibly grievously - but will renew their repentance.**

Summary of Paragraphs 1-3 of Chapter 26 on The Church

1. Paragraph 1: The universal church is comprised of all of the elect – i.e. those who will persevere. It is "invisible" in that the Spirit is at work in the elect – and only in the elect – and we don't know who the elect are. Thus the need for paragraphs 2 & 3:
2. Paragraph 2: The visible church is comprised of those who give outward evidences of being part of the elect. Faith and obedience are those evidences. A life of sin destroys ones profession.

3. Paragraph 3: Churches are subject to mixture and error, as only God knows who are members of the universal church from paragraph 1 – man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart.

In conclusion, a right understanding of “once saved, always saved” is not that every visible church member is saved, but rather that every “invisible” church member is saved by the power of God – and God’s work brings about perseverance in each of those “invisible” members. Visible members who do not persevere are not, and never have been, part of the invisible, universal church. Those are the “church members” who “neglect such a great salvation”, “fall away” and “go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth”.

Of salvation, R.C. Sproul sums it up like this: "If you have it, you never lose it; if you `lose' it, you never had it". The warnings of Hebrews are real and should be taken seriously by every member of every visible church. We will consider this further as we look at the Epistle of James next week:

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. (Jas 1:22)

1689 Baptist Confession of Faith

Chapter 17: The Perseverance of the Saints

17.1

Those God has accepted in the Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, and given the precious faith of his elect can neither totally nor finally fall from a state of grace. They will certainly persevere in grace to the end and be eternally saved, because the gifts and callings of God are irrevocable. Therefore, he still brings about and nourishes in them faith, repentance, love, joy, hope, and all the graces of the Spirit that lead to immortality.¹ Even though many storms and floods arise and beat against them, yet these things will never be able to move the elect from the foundation and rock to which they are anchored by faith. The felt sight of the light and love of God may be clouded and obscured from them for a time through their unbelief and the temptations of Satan.² Yet God is still the same; they will certainly be kept by the power of God for salvation, where they will enjoy their purchased possession. For they are engraved on the palms of his hands, and their names have been written in the book of life from all eternity.³

¹John 10:28, 29; Philippians 1:6; 2 Timothy 2:19; 1 John 2:19

²Psalm 89:31, 32; 1 Corinthians 11:32

³Malachi 3:6

17.2

This perseverance of the saints does not depend on their own free will but on the **unchangeableness of the decree of election**,⁴ which flows from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father. It is **based on the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ and union with him**,⁵ **the oath of God**,⁶ **the abiding of his Spirit, the seed of God within them**,⁷ **and the nature of the covenant of grace**.⁸ **The certainty and infallibility of their perseverance is based on all these things.**

⁴Romans 8:30; Romans 9:11, 16

⁵Romans 5:9, 10; John 14:19

⁶Hebrews 6:17, 18

⁷1 John 3:9

⁸Jeremiah 32:40

17.3

They may fall into grievous sins and continue in them for a time, due to the temptation of Satan and the world, the strength of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of means of their preservation.⁹ In so doing, they incur God's displeasure and grieve his Holy Spirit;¹⁰ their graces and comforts become impaired;¹¹ their hearts are hardened and their consciences wounded;¹² they hurt and scandalize others and bring temporary judgments on themselves.¹³ Nevertheless, **they will renew their repentance** and be preserved through faith in Christ Jesus to the end.¹⁴

⁹Matthew 26:70, 72, 74

¹⁰Isaiah 64:5, 9; Ephesians 4:30

¹¹Psalm 51:10, 12

¹²Psalm 32:3; Psalm 4

¹³2 Samuel 12:14

¹⁴Luke 22:32, 61, 62

1689 Baptist Confession of Faith

Chapter 26: The Church

26.1

The catholic—that is, universal—church may be called invisible with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace. It consists of the full number of the elect who have been, are, or will be gathered into one under Christ her head. The church is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.¹

¹ Hebrews 12:23; Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:10, 22, 23; Ephesians 5:23, 27, 32

26.2

All people throughout the world who profess the faith of the gospel and obedience to God through Christ in keeping with the gospel are and may be called visible saints,² as long as they do not destroy their own profession by any foundational errors or unholy living. All local congregations ought to be made up of these.³

²1 Corinthians 1:2; Acts 11:26

³ Romans 1:7; Ephesians 1:20–22

26.3

The purest churches under heaven are subject to mixture and error.⁴ Some have degenerated so much that they have ceased to be churches of Christ and have become synagogues of Satan.⁵ Nevertheless, Christ always has had and will have in this world to the very end a kingdom of those who believe in him and profess his name.⁶

⁴1 Corinthians 5; Revelation 2; Revelation 3

⁵ Revelation 18:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:11, 12

⁶ Matthew 16:18; Psalm 72:17; Psalm 102:28; Revelation 12:17