

No More Sacrifice

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

28 Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on *the testimony of two or three witnesses*. 29 Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?

30 For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And again, "The LORD will judge His people." 31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb. 10:26-31)

Martin Lloyd-Jones said that misunderstanding Hebrews 6 and Hebrews 10 were the two greatest sources of lack of assurance in his congregation. And small wonder, because those two passages contains two of the severest and most frightening warnings in all of Scripture.

What we have in front of us is God warning us, in the loudest and clearest terms against the most dangerous sin of all. What makes this sin so dangerous is not only how much God hates it, but that it destroys its own mercy. It is like Rahab taking that scarlet cord out of the window. It is like an Israelite not placing the blood on the doorposts on the night of Passover. It is what Jonah spoke of when he said of those who follow worthless idols, that "they forsake their own mercy".

In this book of Hebrews, we should already suspect what this sin might be. Hebrews has not been railing against murder or adultery, or blasphemy. Hebrews has been telling us that Jesus is the Finisher of the Faith, the final prophet, priest and king, that there is nowhere else to go. Hebrews has been telling us to remain faithful to the finisher of our faith, to the end. With that in mind, we should understand the fourth and second last warning passage of the book of Hebrews against the most dangerous sin of all. This passage reveals three components of this most fatal of sins: its nature, its result, and its guilt.

I. The Nature of this Sin

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

The first word of verse 26 connects us back to verses 19 to 25, where he told us to draw near, to hold fast our confession and to consider one another by not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together.

This word *for* is then a logical explanation of why we should draw near, and hold fast, and consider one another. What follows is what happens if we were to do the opposite: to draw back, to cast away our confession, to forsake the assembling of ourselves together.

And that helps us to set the stage to understand what is meant by "sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth."

Many Christians read this and tremble. Does this mean that if we knowingly sin after we are saved that we lose our salvation? Does it mean if I deliberately sin that there is no hope for me?

In fact, a bad interpretation of this very verse brought about a number of heresies in the first centuries of the church. First, the false teaching had developed that baptism washed away your sins. Well, taking this verse, some early theologians said that if you sinned intentionally after having received baptism, you no longer had a sacrifice. So they developed the doctrine of penance: that if

you sinned willfully after baptism, you needed to seek penance and absolution for those sins. And all the elaborate machinery of the Roman church by which there was continual and perpetual sacrifices ended up being the very opposite of what the writer of Hebrews taught about the final sacrifice of Jesus, and would have undoubtedly been staggered to see that his comment here had become the opposite: all kinds perpetual sacrifices.

What does it mean to “sin willfully”? The tense of the verb does not mean once off, isolated sins. This is not murder, or adultery, or even suicide, though may you be delivered from the foolishness of stealing from your Creator the moment before you meet Him. The New Testament tells us what we do with our isolated sins, whether they were done accidentally or deliberately. 1 John 1:9 tells us to confess them. Galatians 6:1 tells us to help restore those who are fallen.

“Sinning” is present continuous, meaning a chosen way of life. This must then mean a whole way of life of sinning. An entirely new posture. Importantly, this whole life of sin is done willfully, knowingly, intentionally. What is this deliberate life of sin? And all we need to do is look into verses 28 and 29 to say what he means by this whole new sinful posture: anyone who *rejected* Moses's law died without mercy, how much worse punishment is he worthy of who has *trampled* underfoot the Son of God, *counted the blood common*, and *insulted* the Spirit of grace. What is this? This willful sin is the sin of rejecting Christ, abandoning the Gospel, setting aside salvation. It is, as it has been so often in Hebrews, the sin of apostasy: turning away from Messiah Jesus, the Finisher of our faith.

In fact, the writer is almost certainly calling on Deuteronomy 17:

2 "If there is found among you, within any of your gates which the LORD your God gives you, a man or a woman who has been wicked in the sight of the LORD your God, in transgressing His covenant, 3 "who has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, either the sun or moon or any of the host of heaven, which I have not commanded, 4 "and it is told you, and you hear *of it*, then you shall inquire diligently. And if *it is* indeed true *and* certain that such an abomination has been committed in Israel, 5 "then you shall bring out to your gates that man or woman who has committed that wicked thing, and shall stone to death that man or woman with stones. 6 "Whoever is deserving of death shall be put to death on the testimony of two or three witnesses; he shall not be put to death on the testimony of one witness. 7 "The hands of the witnesses shall be the first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So you shall put away the evil from among you. (Deut. 17:2-7)

What was the Israelite guilty of here? Apostasy – turning away from the faith. And it is not the rejection of the blind unbeliever, who rejects in ignorance. It is the high-handed sin of one who knows the truth and turns from it. It is rebellion.

II. The Consequences of this Sin

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

Now look at the terrifying results of this action of apostasy.

First, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins. If you reject Jesus as your final sacrifice, there is no sacrifice that comes after Him to take away your sins, and there are no sacrifices before Him that you can go back to. You reject Him, and you reject your own means of salvation.

Every sin can be forgiven, indeed, the sin of unbelief, or rejecting God for years is forgiven on the day you are saved. But just like chapter 6 showed, if you had received this, and then turned from it, there is no second salvation, no second Cross, no salvation to save you from abandoning salvation.

Apostasy is a high-handed, intentional, deliberate sin. Remember, in the Old Covenant, there was no sacrifice for deliberate sins. The sacrifices were for unintentional sins. So, if like David, you had committed high-handed, flagrant, rebellious sin, like adultery and murder, there was no sacrifice for that. All you could do as an obedient Israelite was to present the sacrifices for unintentional sins, and throw yourself upon the mercy of God, trusting that He would atone for those intentional sins too. That's why David wrote: 6 For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give *it*; You do not delight in burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart-- These, O God, You will not despise. (Ps. 51:16-17)

But David knew that God would somehow atone through the coming Messiah. **Psa 19:12** Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults. **Psa 19:13** Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins; Let them not have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, And I shall be innocent of great transgression.

But what do you do if you sin high-handedly, and the Old Testament sacrifices are now over, and you reject the suffering Messiah? David was still within the faith. But what if you step outside it altogether? There is nothing to shield you from God's anger, nothing to cover you, nothing to pay the penalty, satisfy justice.

All that is left is to face God's anger:

27 but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.

The terrifying prospect of judgement and a fiery zeal, righteous indignation that will eat up God's enemies. What can this be except hellfire?

Verse 28 to 29 describe this judgement by arguing from the lesser to the greater.

28 Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on *the testimony of two or three witnesses*. 29 Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? (Heb. 10:28-29)

Those who had rejected the Law of Moses in a high-handed fashion, or committed apostasy were to be stoned, executed. They lost their physical lives, once it had been established by two or three witnesses. If that was the old, inferior covenant, and people were executed for rejecting it, what will be the punishment for those who have the greater light of the now-come Messiah, and reject Him? If a lesser offense, rejecting Moses, was met with ultimate severity in this life, what will be the severity for rejecting Messiah?

Verse 30 and 31. He quotes Deuteronomy 32:35-36. God will take revenge on those who trample His Son underfoot, and insult His Spirit, and spurn His mercies. Sin is outrageous enough, but rejecting God's mercy is even more outrageous. The Lord will judge His people. If you were part of professing Israel, it was no safety if you rejected Him. He would still judge you, and being a child of Abraham was no protection.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Now why should this sin receive such severe treatment?

III. The Culpability of this Sin

29 Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted

the Spirit of grace?

The key words here are “will he be thought worthy”. It means “deserve”. A punishment greater than the death penalty is what apostasy deserves.

Three phrases here tell you what apostasy is really doing, and why it is so abominable to God.

“Trampled the Son of God underfoot”. To step on, to trample is one of the ultimate symbols of disdain and disgust. Take someone's prized photo, or special letter, or toy, and step on, and crush it: you have displayed profound malice and enmity.

We step on those things we regard of little value: rubbish on the ground, dead leaves, litter. In fact, in Japan, in the 1600s, the religious authorities introduced the practice of what is called fumi-e “trampling”. Pictures or carvings of Jesus on the cross or Mary were made, and suspected Christians were told to trample on those images to prove that they were not Christians. If they did not, the authorities identified them as believers and executed them.

To turn your back on the Gospel is to count the person and work of Christ as rubbish and to trample over it. Apostasy is trampling on the Son of God.

The second phrase here is “counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing”

Regarding the blood and death of Jesus as ordinary. The blood and death that sets someone apart for God that rescues them from sin and its vanity, he regards as just another death, just a regular nobody who died in Judea 1986 years ago.

The worthier the life, the more we want to preserve it, and sustain it and lengthen it. When you have a perfect life, you would not want it to end at all. But if it is voluntarily, sacrificially ended, you would expect everyone to cherish it, reverence it, mark it, honour it. To shrug and treat it like a common, ordinary thing is a profound injustice.

The third phrase is “insulted the Spirit of grace” Apostasy is insulting God's Spirit. This literally means to outrage, to heap contempt on. The Holy Spirit draws you, first convicting you of sin, righteousness and judgement, then drawing you to the beauty of the Saviour, persuading you that sin is deceit and that Jesus is the truth. He opens your eyes, patiently enduring unbelief, foolishness, hard-heartedness, stubbornness, until the eyes see and the heart is opened.

To reject all that is to call the Spirit a liar, to count His persuasion as incorrect, to shun His work and call it a sham.

Do you see why apostasy is so worthy of severe punishment? Because it is a sin with knowledge. It is high-handed, presumptuous rebellion. It is not ignorant, but knowing and chosen. The Bible teaches that the greater the knowledge, the greater the accountability and therefore the greater the punishment.

47 "And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare *himself* or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many *stripes*. 48 "But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more. (Lk. 12:47-48)

Not only is apostasy a sin against knowledge, it is also a sin against goodness. It is an act of

repaying good with evil. Sin has its own punishment. But when sin has been forgiven, and the person now abuses that kindness, the sin is far greater. It is an act of repaying God evil for good.

13 Whoever rewards evil for good, Evil will not depart from his house. (Prov. 17:13)

When Jesus gave the parable of the evil tenants, who kept beating the servants that the landowner sent, He ended the story with the landowner sending his son. He tenants know that it is the son, and say, "Let's kill him and get the inheritance." Jesus then asked his audience what should be done to those men who repaid evil for good and who did so knowingly.

40 "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?" 41 They said to Him, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease *his* vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons." (Matt. 21:40-41)

Hebrews is warning us about the sin of apostasy, the terrible results of it, and the deep guilt of it. So once again, we need to ask, who is this passage warning? Can Christians commit this sin and lose their salvation? Or is this referring to people who are not quite saved?

I think this is exactly what we saw in chapter 6. This is a real warning to real people using a hypothetical situation. As Hebrews so clearly teaches: those who are saved are saved to the uttermost. Those who are part of God's household continue to the end. Those denying Christ are those to whom Jesus says, "I never knew you".

Spurgeon: "This is a solemn text, containing a very terrible truth. If, after having been regenerated, and made children of God, we were willfully and deliberately to let the Savior go, and apostatize altogether to the world, there would be no hope for us. What, then, is our hope? Why, that we shall never be permitted to do so,-that the grace of God will keep us so that, although we may fall like Peter, we shall not fall away like Judas,-that, though we may sin, there shall not be that degree of studied willfulness about it that would make it to be the sin unto death, a deliberate act of spiritual suicide. The doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints derives great glory from this other truth that, if they did not persevere, there is no second means of grace, no other plan of salvation. No man was ever born again twice; no man was ever washed twice in the precious blood of Jesus."

True believers don't apostatise, and apostates are not believers. So why is this warning given?

The first reason is that warnings are part of the means God uses to achieve His ends. Even if the warned outcome is not possible, the warning is exactly what makes sure it does not happen. For example, Joseph was warned in a dream to flee from Herod with Jesus and Mary. Now was it possible for Herod to kill the Messiah before His time? No. But Joseph fleeing was a means to bring about the result, which in God's plan was already certain. When Paul was told that the everyone on board a ship would survive the storm. Even though this was certain, Paul told the soldiers, "except these stay on the ship, you cannot be saved". There was a warning, which was the means to achieve the certain end.

Though it is certain that God's people will not perish, God warns them about the awful danger of turning away from Christ as a means to keep them from perishing. God knows who His children are, and knows they will not end up in the fire, but warning them about the fire is a means of keeping them from it. God knows, but we do not. Therefore, from our side, the call is: be faithful, draw near, hold fast, don't forsake.

The second reason is because of all the almost Christians reading or hearing the book. They are not saved, they have not yet trusted Jesus as Lord and Saviour. But they are getting more and more

familiar with truth, more and more comfortable with being around it but not in it. They choose to be associated with it, but not submitted to it. And like the fatted calf eating more and more food, they are storing up more and more indictments against themselves the longer they delay to turn to Christ. All the knowledge, all the learning, is like gold filling the pockets of someone being told to walk the plank off a ship, it will only make them sink faster into destruction, should they be pushed off the edge of this life.

This warning says, to reject Christ when you know much but haven't truly embraced him is a far greater sin, and places you in a far worse state than the sinner who knows very little and rejects Christ.

The more you know and are exposed to truth, the more culpable and responsible you are for all that truth. The longer you go with an unsaved heart, immersing yourself in Christian truth, the worse it will be for you if you don't draw near and embrace Christ and hold fast the confession. Because the longer you go without submitting, should you turn away, your sinful heart will tell you that you have already investigated Christianity thoroughly, and it's not for you. And you will tell yourself that you tried it and it didn't work out for you. So truth will end up your enemy, vaccinating you against the real experience of salvation.

Though such people are not committing apostasy, they are dabbling with a close cousin: rejecting the truth when you have become deeply immersed in it. The sin is greater, the guilt is greater, and the writer warns his almost-Christian readers. A true believer who turned away from God would have no mercy, and neither will you if you turn away from Christ before you have truly accepted Him.

Why would you forsake your own mercy? No alternative but Christ, so no alternative to Him except the anger of the living God. Flee from the wrath to come, flee to Jesus, no turning or looking back.