

Hebrews: The Supremacy of Christ above All Things
Believer, Beware!

Hebrews 12:25-29 and other “Warning” Passages
Understanding the Warning Passages

Introduction:

This will now be the fifth and final time that we address one of the warning passages in Hebrews.

- 2:1-4 (Read 2:1-3)

Hebrews 2:1-3 (ESV)

¹Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. ²For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, ³how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard,

- 3:7-4:13 (Read 3:7-19, 4:11-13)

Hebrews 3:7-19 (ESV)

⁷Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice, ⁸do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, ⁹where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works ¹⁰for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’ ¹¹As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’ ” ¹²Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. ¹⁵As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.” ¹⁶For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? ¹⁷And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Hebrews 4:11-13 (ESV)

¹¹Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. ¹²For 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. ¹³And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

- 5:11-6:12 (Read 5:11, 6:1-8)

Hebrews 5:11 (ESV)

¹¹About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.

Hebrews 6:1-8 (ESV)

¹Therefore 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, ²and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³And this we will do if God permits. ⁴For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶if they then fall away, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. ⁷For 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. ⁸But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

- 10:19-39 (Read 26-31)

Hebrews 10:26-31 (ESV)

²⁶For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. ²⁸Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁹How

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? 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 fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

- 12:12-29 (Read 12:25-29)

Hebrews 12:25-29 (ESV)

²⁵ 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. ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” ²⁷ This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.

Here is the dilemma these passages create: *Most people come to these kinds of texts with their minds already made-up.* They either believe that it is **impossible** for a Christian to lose his/her salvation or they believe that it **is possible** for one to lose his/her salvation. What this means is that because they come to the text with their mind already made-up, their starting point is going to affect their end point. It means that their theology is being read into the text.

Proper Bible interpretation happens as we seek to set aside our presuppositions so as to allow the text to speak for itself. We must let the text of Scripture inform our theology and not have our theology inform the text. Is that clear?

Let me show you some of the pitfalls. For example, when you read in our text this morning: “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,” certain questions must be asked:

- To whom is this warning made? When the text says, “See that **you** do not refuse him...” who does the pronoun “you” refer to? If it is believers, then what is the threat? What won’t we escape?
- What is the threat? The text continues on after it says, “much less will we escape if we reject him who speaks from heaven...” to say in v.29, “for our God is a consuming fire.” Is this threatening genuine believers with hell?

Well, if you bring your theology to the text and begin with a presupposition that it is impossible for believers to lose their salvation and finally be lost forever, you would automatically assume, this is (1) not a threat of hell, or (2) not really addressing believers.

- If it is addressing true believers with a threat of hell then you would have to conclude that believers can go to hell. That won’t work for most of you. So maybe it’s not threatening of hell, but loss of rewards...
- But if, on the other hand, you believe that this is really a threat of hell, then you will have to conclude that it is not really addressing true believers because they can’t go to hell. This, it must be addressing those who fall away from the faith because they were not genuinely saved in the first place. The warnings become a test of genuineness.

Such an assumption, however, really weakens the normal and straight-forward reading of the text. In other words, you really have to start playing linguistic games to keep your interpretation from threatening your theological system.

I believe we need to let the passages speak for themselves so as to accomplish their intended purpose. The book of Hebrews is a sermon aimed at motivating a group of believers to persevere in their faith – to not turn back from Christ to Judaism.

I begin with a few basic principles for hearing them properly:

1. The writer is addressing only one class of people, i.e. genuine believers. The writer seems absolutely convinced of their spiritual status. He calls them “brothers” in 3:12. That is a normal way of addressing Christians. But it is much stronger than this. Notice...

- ❖ Hebrews 3:12 (ESV)
¹²Take care, *brothers*, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.
- ❖ Hebrews 4:1-3 (ESV)
¹Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. ²For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. ³For *we who have believed* enter that rest, as he has said, “As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest,’” although his works were finished from the foundation of the world.
- ❖ Hebrews 6:4 (ESV)
⁴For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have *once been enlightened*, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit,
- ❖ Hebrews 6:9 (ESV)
⁹Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, *we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation*.
- ❖ Hebrews 10:32 (ESV)
³²But recall the former days when, *after you were enlightened*, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings,
- ❖ Hebrews 10:39 (ESV)
³⁹But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

We must assume that the conditional promises and warnings carry a sincere function for genuine believers.

2. The writer is not only convinced of the reality of the faith of his readers; but he is also convinced of his own prospect of drifting away, etc. Therefore, he includes himself in the warnings as a humble preacher who is not “lording it” over his audience.

- ❖ Hebrews 2:3 (ESV)
³how shall *we* escape if *we* neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to *us* by those who heard,
- ❖ Hebrews 3:14 (ESV)
¹⁴For *we* share in Christ, if indeed *we* hold our original confidence firm to the end.
- ❖ Hebrews 10:26 (ESV)
²⁶For if *we* go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,

❖ Hebrews 12:25 (ESV)

²⁵ 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.

There is not a single believer in this room who is exempt from the struggles that exist in this life due to remaining sin. Therefore, each and every one of us needs to heed the warnings presented in Scripture.

3. The author is threatening nothing less than the wrath of God itself in each of the warnings.

❖ Hebrews 2:3 (ESV)

³ how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard,

❖ Hebrews 3:11-12 (ESV)

¹¹ As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’ ¹² Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.

❖ Hebrews 4:11-13 (ESV)

¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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.

❖ Hebrews 6:7-8 (ESV)

⁷ 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. ⁸ But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

❖ Hebrews 10:26-27 (ESV)

²⁶ For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

❖ Hebrews 12:29 (ESV)

²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.

So if we put #1 and #2 together, we get genuine believers being threatened with real hell. But why? Simply because the preacher wants to motivate his hearers to a persevering faith. The emphasis is not on the threat – as we hear it – but on the promises and commands.

4. In each of the warning passages, there is a threat that is meant to be felt with a great deal of force so as to hear the accompanying exhortation with urgency, not desperation. In each of the warning passages there is a clear exhortation (command) that the writer is calling his readers to. It usually comes in the language of “let us do...” He wants the exhortation to be heeded with urgency but not with doubt. For this reason, nearly all of them come attached to conditional **promises** as well. We will not call the promises into question but we will simply hear them in light of the warnings. The clearest example comes in ...

Hebrews 10:19-27 (ESV)

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, *since we have confidence* to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, [that’s a promise]²¹ and *since we have a great priest* over the house of God, [that’s another promise]²² *let us draw near* [there’s a command, or exhortation] ²³ *Let us hold fast the*

confession of our hope [there's another exhortation]²⁴ And *let us consider* how to stir up one another [there's one more...then comes the warning]

The warning comes in v.26:

Hebrews 10:26-27 (ESV)

²⁶For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

As a motivational sermon, then, the warning passages stand as **a means of perseverance**.

The warning passages in the book of Hebrews are being used as a literary device to create in the listeners a sense of urgency as they hear, not the threats so much, but the promises and commands needed for a persevering faith.

Here is an analogy that we have used over the past year or so:

If I said to you husbands, "See that you do not refuse your wife when she is speaking because hell has no fury like a woman scorned." How many of you, upon hearing that warning asked yourself, "Am I really married in the first place?" Of course not! If you weren't married, there would be no need of warning you. How many of you, upon hearing that woman asked yourself, "Will she really kill me?" Of course not! How many of you heard the warning as a command to pay attention to your wife – to be good listeners? Of course you did! That's the purpose of that kind of speech. It motivates its hearers to listen to the exhortation. In this analogy, the exhortation is to listening.

Here is another analogy: If I said to my child, "When we go to the park, do not leave my sight. There are dangerous men out there who will kidnap you and kill you. If you stay by my side, you will be safe." Does my child ask, "Am I really your child in the first place?" Of course not! If they were not my child, I wouldn't be warning them to stay by my side. Do they think to themselves, "Will they really kill me?" Of course not! They hear with urgency, "Don't leave Dad's side. He's serious!"

Now let's see if this fits our last warning text:

Notice first the promise that begins in v. 18:

Hebrews 12:18-24 (ESV)

¹⁸For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." ²¹Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." ²²***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, ²³and 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, ²⁴and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

You live in the shadow of the better mountain not the fearful and foreboding Mt. Sinai but the festive Mt. Zion – the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. It is to this mountain that you have come (speaking of believers).

In light of this promise, then, hear the warning in v. 25: "See that you do not refuse him who is speaking." Do not reject Christ. He is not desirous of having you ask of yourself, "Well am I saved in the first place?" No! He is desirous of having you hear the coming exhortations with urgency. What are those exhortations, those commands?

The commands come in v.28:

Hebrews 12:28-29 (ESV)

²⁸Therefore *let us be grateful* for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus *let us offer* to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹for our God is a consuming fire.

The opposite of refusing him who speaks from heaven – the opposite of refusing Christ is to respond with a heart of grateful worship. He is not asking you to call into question whether or not you have really received the kingdom in the first place. No! He wants you to respond with a worship that is acceptable. And he defines acceptable worship in the phrase “reverence and awe.”

The phrase “with reverence and awe” is to be understood as “with a fear of God...because he is a consuming fire.” The fear of God means that we must fear insulting the worth of God when we live in such a way that our allegiances are tied only to this earth – when we sell-out to other pleasures that beckon; or to fear the insult of God’s worth when we live in such a way that our allegiances are tied only to this life – when we cave-in beneath the pressures that threaten.

To worship God with holy fear means to worship God with the fear that you may insult his great worth by returning to some other source of worship.

Do you live in a daily fear of God? Do you have a fear of God as a motivation for your worship and devotion? I think the exhortation here is simply: Do not take God lightly or flippantly. He is a consuming fire.

5. The warning passages appear to take a corporate view of perseverance. That is to say, my persevering is your business and yours is mine. We exist in the context of the church for a reason – to rescue the drifting, correct the deceived, instruct the dull of hearing and lift up the drooping hands of the weak.

6. The warning passages are arguing from a salvation-historical approach. That is, they are drawing attention to the supremacy of Christ above all things. There is no other plan coming. He is the end of the line. Jesus Christ is the ultimate answer for sinners. If you refuse him, you refuse the ultimate. If those who rejected God speaking through Moses were punished, how much greater punishment do you suppose, and how much more likely will it be for those who now reject God speaking from heaven in the person of Christ?