The Lord Will Judge His People: An Analysis of the Warning Passages in Hebrews

Introduction

For centuries, the terrifying warnings contained in the book of Hebrews have puzzled and troubled believers. According to the traditional Reformed interpretation, these warnings concern false believers who are never truly regenerate, and according to the traditional Arminian interpretation, these warnings concern once genuine believers who fail to enter heaven. Against both of these views, I will argue that the warnings in Hebrews describe the very real danger of genuine believers committing defiant sin and thus experiencing the fierce eschatological judgment of God upon his people. Due to the considerable overlap in the various warning passages scattered throughout Hebrews, I will arrange my argument thematically instead of examining each passage in isolation. First, I will argue in response to the Reformed view that the warnings are directed to genuine believers, not false believers, and concern a real possibility, not a hypothetical one. Secondly, I will argue in response to the Arminian view that the warnings encompass all defiant sin, not only final apostasy. Thirdly, I will argue in response to both views that the warnings envision the fierce eschatological judgment of God upon his people, not eternal damnation in hell.

A Real Danger for True Believers

True Believers and not False Believers

In Hebrews 6.4-5, the author describes those who “fall away” as those who “were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come.” Though this seems to be a clear description of the regenerate, John Calvin suggests that these verses describe those who have been granted only the first glimpses of salvation:

[While] God certainly bestows His Spirit of regeneration only on the elect…I do not see that this is any reason why He should not touch the reprobate with a taste of His grace, or

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1 Ironically, Arminius held the Reformed view, not the view which bears his name. See Gleason, “A Moderate Reformed View,” 336.

2 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.
illumine their minds with some glimmerings of His light, or affect them with some sense of His goodness, or to some extent engrave His Word into their hearts.\(^3\)

Calvin’s solution, however, does not do justice to the text. Nothing in Hebrews 6.4-5 indicates that the enlightenment, tasting, or partaking is partial or incomplete. As Grant Osborne aptly notes, “If this passage were found in Romans 8, we would all hail it as the greatest description of Christian blessings in the entire Bible.”\(^4\) Furthermore in Hebrews 10.29, the author states that the apostates have been “sanctified” by “the blood of the covenant,” that is, the blood of Christ. In addition, the author refers to his audience as “holy brethren” and “partakers of the heavenly calling” (Heb. 3.1). If he wished to describe true believers, what more could he say?

Buist Fanning concedes, “A straightforward reading of these descriptions leads us to understand them to refer to full and genuine Christian experience,”\(^5\) but proceeds to argue, “The writer is describing the phenomena of their conversion, what their Christian experience looks like outwardly.”\(^6\) According to Fanning, the author of Hebrews says what is not actually true. He states that certain individuals have been “sanctified” by “the blood of the covenant,” when in reality they have not been sanctified. He states that certain individuals have become “partakers of the Holy Spirit,” when in reality they have not received the Spirit. In defense of this creative exegesis, Fanning argues that a straightforward reading of the various elements in Hebrews will lead to an impossible contradiction; thus “every interpreter must adjust the straightforward reading of one of the elements.”\(^7\) Fanning contends that a straightforward reading of certain passages results in the conclusion “that those who are already on the pathway toward final salvation will certainly reach that goal because and by means of God’s fidelity, not their own.”\(^8\) Thus, every interpreter must either adjust the straightforward reading of the assurance passages


\(^7\) Fanning, “A Classical Reformed View,” 218.

or adjust the straightforward reading of the warning passages; a consistent straightforward reading of Hebrews is impossible.

However, the author of Hebrews never assures his readers that they will not succumb to the danger he describes. On the contrary, he urges them to “beware” (Heb. 3.12) and to “fear” (Heb. 4.1). As Grant Osborne explains, assurance is present in Hebrews, but it is “conditional rather than unconditional assurance.” The author of Hebrews assures his readers that, in his high priestly office, Jesus is both able and faithful to sustain them, but the purpose of this assurance is to encourage his readers to cling to Christ in faith. He urges, “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4.16). A clear condition is expressed here. Unless the readers “come boldly to the throne of grace,” they will not “obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” The author of Hebrews proclaims that Jesus is “able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him” (Heb. 7.25), but this provides no assurance to those who “turn away” from God (Heb. 12.25) and “[trample] the son of God underfoot” (Heb. 10.29). On the contrary, the author specifically states that those who commit such a heinous deed will not benefit from the high priestly ministry of Christ (Heb. 10.26-27). Instead, they will incur fiery judgment (Heb. 10.28-31). As Gareth Cockerill notes, “Far from nullifying the warning passages, the full adequacy and sufficiency of God’s work in Christ is the reason they are so severe.” In short, Fanning has merely created an artificial tension in the text in order to justify exegesis which, on his own admission, is rather strained.

Furthermore, even if one could accept that the author of Hebrews is deliberately speaking untruths for some sort of rhetorical effect, Fanning’s solution ultimately fails. The analogy with Israel, which undergirds the argument of Hebrews, is based on the presupposition that the readers are members of the new covenant. The logic of the warning passages is as follows: if those who broke the old covenant received punishment, how much more will those who break the new covenant be punished!

If the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? (Heb. 2.2-3)

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Anyone who has rejected Moses law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot? (Heb. 10.28-29)

If they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven. (Heb. 12.25)

Surely no one would suggest that the failure of the Israelites demonstrated that they were never truly included in the covenant God made at Sinai. On the contrary, they were punished precisely because they “did not continue in” that covenant (Heb. 8.9). Nevertheless, Fanning insists that those who “fall according to the same example of disobedience” (Heb. 4.11) thus demonstrate that they were never truly included in the new covenant and were never truly the people of God. Such a notion is, I believe, foreign to Hebrews. The judgment envisioned in the warning passages is the judgment of the Lord upon “His people” (Heb. 10.30).

In Hebrews 10.30, the author quotes two statements from Deuteronomy 32.35-36: “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. And again, “The LORD will judge His people.”

In the context of Deuteronomy, both affirmations are spoken as encouragement, and the second is translated, “The LORD will vindicate his people” (Deut. 32.36, NIV, NAS, NRS, ESV). Therefore, Calvin suggests that the judgment in view in Hebrews 10.30 is the purification of God’s people through the removal of “the hypocrites…usurping their place among the faithful.”

Cockerill goes perhaps a bit further and understands the judgment only in the positive sense of vindication. However, this interpretation seems quite strained; the immediate context of Hebrews 10.30 makes it abundantly clear that the judgment is to be understood negatively as punishment, not positively as either purification or vindication:

But a certain fearful expectation of judgment [κρίσεως], and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries…Of how much worse punishment will he be thought worthy…For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. And again, “The LORD will judge [κρίνει] His people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb. 10.27-31)

In addition to Hebrews 10.30, the author uses the same verb once more in Hebrews 13.4, where again, it clearly implies punishment: “fornicators and adulterers God will judge [κρίνει].”

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11 Calvin, “The Epistle of Paul The Apostle to the Hebrews,” 150.

Furthermore, the subject of the judgment in Hebrews 10.30 is explicitly stated to be the people of God, not those masquerading as the people of God. As Craig Koester states, “This verse…reinforces the idea that not even God’s own people are exempt from judgment.”¹³

The broader context of Deuteronomy 32.36 reveals that the author of Hebrews has not misused the text. In this passage, known as the Song of Moses, Moses recounts God’s tender care for Israel (Deut. 27.1-14), Israel’s treacherous rebellion (Deut. 27.15-18), and God’s wrath upon his children (Deut. 27.19-25):

They provoked Him to jealousy with foreign gods; with abominations they provoked Him to anger….And when the LORD saw it, He spurned them, because of the provocation of His sons and His daughters. And he said…“A fire is kindled in My anger.” (Deut. 32.16-22)

Nevertheless, despite his fiery indignation, God desists from destroying his people completely, lest the wicked nations, used as instruments for Israel’s judgment, should blaspheme. In Deuteronomy 32.23-43, from which the words of Hebrews 10:30 are drawn, God promises to one day vindicate Israel and punish those other nations for their own wickedness. Therefore, though the author of Hebrews uses these particular words in a slightly different manner from Moses, his use is still consistent with the broader message of Deuteronomy 32, which concerns God’s judgment of his people. As F. F. Bruce explains,

[Deuteronomy 32.36] certainly means that [God] will execute judgment on [Israel’s] behalf, vindicating their cause against their enemies, but it carries with it the corollary that, on the same principles of impartial righteous, he will execute judgment against them when they forsake his covenant….What was true then remains true for God’s dealings with his people now.¹⁴

A Real Danger and Not a Hypothetical Danger

Alan Mugridge, though Reformed, acknowledges that Hebrews 6.4-6 describes Christians and affirms that all of the warning passages are addressed to genuine believers. However, he asks, Does this mean that it is possible for Christians to commit apostasy?...Hebrews does not explicitly answer this question of course. Rather the author was concerned to spell out the meaning of such action if it were to occur, as well as the consequences which would follow…This was done in order to ward the readers off pursuing this course of action.¹⁵

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Mugridge proceeds to express his view that such apostasy is not indeed possible; any professing believer who falls away thus demonstrates that his faith was never truly genuine.

This argument is really rather shocking, for Mugridge seems to be implicitly claiming a better understanding of soteriology than the author of Hebrews. Mugridge acknowledges that the author of Hebrews wrote with the express purpose of dissuading his Christian readers from committing apostasy; therefore, unless he was engaged in a program of unconscionable deceit and manipulation, the author must have at least suspected that such an act was possible for his readers to commit. Mugridge, however, believes such an act is impossible. Perhaps he is correct. Perhaps he has discovered something that the author of Hebrews did not know, but such questions are irrelevant to this paper, for we are seeking to determine what the author himself believed.

All Defiant Sin

In a “formal analysis of the warning passages,” Scott McKnight seeks to establish that “the writer has a particular sin in mind.” However, as evident from his own description of his methodology, his argument is based on circular reasoning, for he begins by assuming his conclusion:

We first eliminate words and expressions that do not offer much clarity – besides others, words like “slip away” (2:1), “sin” (3:17), and “lazy” (5:11; 6:12). It is not that these words are not valuable; rather, it is that they are either so general (“sin”) or ambiguous (“slip away”) in their metaphorical implication that they are not decisive enough to offer the clarity we are seeking.

Naturally, after employing this methodology, McKnight discovers that the author is referring only to “a deliberate and public act of deconfessing Jesus Christ” and “no other sin is in view.” However, his method permits no other conclusion! If one eliminates all of the language which refers generally to sin, one will of course conclude that the author is not referring generally to sin.

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Furthermore, in addition to eliminating all language referring generally to sin, McKnight has also eliminated all language referring to any specific sin except apostasy. His analysis of “the warning passages of Hebrews” does not include Hebrews 13.4: “Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.” Despite the brevity of this passage, no one can deny that it constitutes a warning; therefore it cannot be legitimately excluded from a discussion of the “warning passages.” As Koester observes, Hebrews 13.4 reflects themes present in the other warning passages:

Just as God judges those whose unbelief defiles the new covenant that sanctifies them (10:29-31), God judges those who defile their relationships rather than pursuing the holiness that is consistent with the new covenant (12:14).20

Furthermore, fornication is also mentioned in chapter 12: “Lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau” (Heb. 12.16). William Lane argues that the term “fornicator” does not reference one who commits sexual sin; rather, “the context of v 16 clearly points to a metaphorical understanding of the term in the figurative sense of ‘apostate.’”21 He notes that the previous verse is apparently alluding to Deuteronomy 29:18, which speaks of those “whose heart turns away today from the LORD our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations.” Throughout the OT, such behavior is described metaphorically as fornication (Ex. 34.15-17; Deut. 31.16).22 However, the fact that the author explicitly prohibits fornication and adultery in his concluding list of pointed commands (13.1-19) demonstrates that sexual sin was a particular concern in the community. Koester’s claim, “There is little to suggest that immorality was a special problem for the listeners,” is entirely unjustified.23 Therefore, knowing from Hebrews 13.4 that the author was particularly concerned his audience would engage in sexual sin, the unqualified command to abstain from fornication in Hebrews 12.16 can hardly be taken in any sense but the literal. Some object here that Genesis never attributes fornication to Esau. However, the author of Hebrews does not necessarily attribute fornication to Esau either. More likely, he is simply arguing that, in forfeiting a heavenly inheritance for momentary pleasure, the fornicator is acting like Esau, “who for one morsel of food sold his birthright” (Heb. 12.16).

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20 Koester, Hebrews, 566.
22 Lane, Hebrews 9-13, 455.
23 Koester, Hebrews, 541.
After arguing that the author only envisions the particular sin of apostasy, McKnight asserts: “This is not hidden; it is noticeable and its practitioner is aware of it and proud of it. Pastorally speaking, I would suggest that those who worry over whether they have committed this sin show thereby that they have not committed it.” However, these sentiments are entirely contrary to the tenor of Hebrews. If the only sin the author envisions is “not hidden,” why does he remind his readers that the word of God slices through the secrets of their souls, leaving them “naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4.12-13)? If the only sin the author envisions is so “noticeable,” why does the author exhort his readers to continue “looking carefully” for it (Heb. 12.15)? If the only people who have committed the sin are “aware of it,” why does the author say, “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief” (Hebrews 3.12)? Surely such language implies introspection and reflection. Finally, if the only people who have committed the sin are “proud of it,” why does the author point to Esau, who “found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears” (Heb. 12.17)?

In conclusion, the scope of the warnings is indicated by the author in Hebrews 10.26: “If we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.” The author is evidently referring to Numbers 15.22-31, which after proscribing sacrifices for sins committed “unintentionally,” explains that there is no sacrifice available for those who commit sin ἐν χειρὶ ὑπερηφανίας (with a hand of arrogance). Such “high handed” sin incurs the death penalty. Evidently, a “high handed” sin is not merely a conscious sin; sacrifices were available, for example, for those who robbed a neighbor (Lev. 6.1-7). Nevertheless, Numbers 15.30-31 seems to be describing all sin characterized by open defiance or rebellion against God. It is unlikely that the author of Hebrews had anything less in mind.

The Judgment of God’s People

Most commentators understand the judgment envisioned in the warning passages as eternal damnation in hell. However, the author of Hebrews never explicitly mentions hell. Randall Gleason notes “the conspicuous absence of ‘damnation’ terminology commonly found throughout the New Testament and contemporary Jewish literature.”

interpret the language of fire (Heb. 6.8; 10.27) in light of other NT texts such as Matthew 25.41 and Mark 9.43. However, as in Deuteronomy 32:22, which was discussed on page 6, the imagery of fire is frequently used in the OT to describe the judgment of God’s people under the old covenant. Peter O’Brien notes allusions in Hebrews 6.7-8 to the “covenant context” of Deuteronomy, including the language of blessing and cursing (see Deut. 28) and “the burning of the land as an image of judgment” (see Deut. 29:23-27). An even clearer parallel is found in Isaiah 5.1-7, an extended metaphor in which Israel is described as a vineyard which God cultivated and watered, but which did not bear good fruit and was therefore “burned.”

Furthermore, as discussed previously, the fact that the author envisions a judgment of God’s people is made explicit in Hebrews 10:30: “The Lord will judge his people.” Therefore, the author does not envision hell, for clearly, hell is not the place where the Lord judges his people! The occupants of hell are not the people of God. Furthermore, the idea that Hebrews is warning against eternal damnation conflicts with the underlying logic of the epistle. As noted previously, the author of Hebrews anchors his warnings in the analogy of the OT narrative. Just as God judged his people when they violated the old covenant, he will certainly judge his people when they violate the new covenant. But despite the judgment, they are still his people! As noted in the prior discussion of Deuteronomy 32.36, God’s designation of the Israelites as “His people” did not come before their punishment or during their punishment, but after their punishment. The Lord declared,

A fire is kindled in My anger, and shall burn to the lowest hell; it shall consume the earth with her increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains. I will heap disasters on them; I will spend My arrows on them. They shall be wasted with hunger, devoured by pestilence and bitter destruction. (Deut. 32.22-24)

But when it was all over, Israel remained “His people” (Deut. 32.36). It was undoubtedly the presence of such clear teaching throughout the entire OT story which prompted Paul to declare in Romans 11, “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11.29).

In arguing against the hell hypothesis, however, Gleason errs in the opposite direction. He asserts that, instead of hell, the judgment threatening those under the new covenant is essentially the same as the judgment experienced by those under the old covenant. He argues that the judgment envisioned in the warning passages is only terrestrial, physical judgment, namely,

the impending destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies. The command, “go forth to Him, outside the camp” (Heb. 13.13), is a command to literally leave the city! This view has been thoroughly critiqued. In addition to anchoring his argument on the precarious hypothesis that the epistle was written to Christians living in Jerusalem, Gleason does not give proper weight to the eschatological tone of the epistle. Under the old covenant, God’s people were promised rest in the land if they would obey (Deut. 28:1-14). The author of Hebrews, however, offers his readers no assurance of peace and prosperity in this life. Rather, he reminds them they are aliens in the world (Heb. 13.14) and urges them to look toward the “kingdom which cannot be shaken” (Heb. 12.28). Furthermore, just as the blessings are greater under the new covenant, so also are the curses. As the author asks in Hebrews 10.29, “Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot?” Gleason’s view fails to adequately account for the author’s argument from the lesser to the greater.

However, the notion that the author of Hebrews is referring to hell also violates the logic of the epistle. The movement is from the lesser judgment of God’s people under the old covenant to the greater judgment of God’s people under the new covenant. However, the Reformed view asserts a movement from the judgment of God’s people under the old covenant to the judgment of those who are not God’s people and who were never under the new covenant. Likewise, the Arminian view asserts a movement from the judgment of God’s people under the old covenant to the exclusion of God’s people from the new covenant. Both the Reformed and the Arminian view, therefore, anchor the argument of the epistle in a false analogy. The judgment of God’s people within the covenant cannot serve as a proper analogy for either the judgment of those outside the covenant or the removal of God’s people from the covenant.

However, if the author of Hebrews is not referring to hell, what precisely does he envision? Here, I suspect our exegesis is plagued by an overly simplistic and overly sentimental view of heaven. We approach Hebrews with certain beliefs about the afterlife, and I suggest it is such preconceptions, and not the text itself, which require commentators like Fanning to “adjust the straightforward reading.” Perhaps we cannot resolve the seemingly disparate elements of Hebrews because we have little room in our theology for heavenly judgment. Nevertheless, both

the OT and the NT describe heaven as a terrifying place (Is. 6.1-5; 2 Cor. 5:1-11). Those Christians who “crucify again for themselves the son of God” (Heb. 6.6) will find little comfort in the presence of the “consuming fire” (Heb. 12.29)!

**Conclusion**

The author of Hebrews is warning true believers that they will incur the fierce eschatological judgment of God if they engage in defiant sin. The warnings concern those who have been “sanctified” by “the blood of the covenant” (Heb. 10.29) and who “have become partakers of the Holy Spirit” (Heb. 6.4). Therefore, the warnings are addressed to true believers. The sin which will incur judgment cannot be limited to a public renunciation of Christianity, for it also includes other defiant sins such as adultery and fornication (Heb. 13.4). Finally, the judgment in view is the judgment of God upon his people (Heb. 10:30); thus it cannot be the judgment of the damned in hell. Therefore, the terrifying warnings in Hebrews cannot be brushed aside. They cannot be restricted to false believers or to those who are renouncing the faith. The warning passages are intended to frighten everyone in the Christian community and drive all believers “to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4.16).
Works Cited


