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## THE ONLY OPTIONS: CHRIST OR JUDGMENT?

Hebrews 10:26-31

By

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Hebrews Lesson 30

### The Only Options: Christ or Judgment? Hebrews 10:26-31

Charles Spurgeon tells about a church that was asked to accept as their minister a man who did not believe in hell. They said, "You have come to tell us that there is no hell. If your doctrine is true, we certainly do not need you. And if it's not true, we don't want you. So either way, we can do without you" (*Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopedia* [Baker], 10:149; slightly edited).

To speak about God's terrifying future judgment is not pleasant, but it is necessary, since the Bible clearly teaches that it will happen. Although some prominent evangelical leaders deny the doctrine of hell, we need to remember that Jesus spoke more about the terrors of hell than anyone else in the Bible. We cannot claim to follow Christ and at the same time reject the doctrine of eternal punishment.

It is a doctrine with great practical ramifications. Spurgeon also said (*ibid.*, p. 146), "Think lightly of hell, and you will think lightly of the cross. Think little of the suffering of lost souls, and you will soon think little of the Savior who delivers you from them." Although Jonathan Edwards based his famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," on a verse from Deuteronomy, he got the title from verse 31 of our text. God used that powerful sermon to convert many to Christ. I have read it many times, but I recently listened to an actor delivering the sermon as Edwards may have given it. He hammers home with frightening force the terrors of impending judgment, but also the refuge of the cross. Those are the only options, as our text shows:

If we reject Christ as God's sacrifice for our sins, we will face  
His certain, terrifying judgment.

This is the second difficult warning passage in Hebrews (6:4-8 was the other). It is difficult not only because of the subject, but also because some of it is difficult to interpret. Before we work through the text, I will give you the major options, beginning with the least likely, as I understand things.

The least likely view is the Arminian view, that our text describes true believers who sin and lose their salvation. The problem with this view is that they have to explain away the many passages that clearly teach that salvation is God's free gift, not based on anything in us, but only on the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Even this very chapter (10:1-18) strongly makes the point that Christ's sacrifice once for all perfected us and took away all of our guilt.

Some early church fathers, however, mistakenly inferred from this and other passages in Hebrews that there was no forgiveness for sins committed after baptism. This judgment was usually reserved for "big" sins, such as denial of the faith under persecution, murder, idolatry, and sexual sins. But, the problem was, baptized Christians did sometimes commit such sins and later repent. Could they not be forgiven?

Some, following *The Shepherd of Hermas* (ca., A.D. 140), argued that forgiveness could be obtained once after baptism, but no more. Tertullian, who was more strict, condemned Hermas for this concession, which he saw as the thin edge of a dangerous wedge. Others who were more tolerant extended Hermas' concession indefinitely, but demanded penance. F. F. Bruce, who discusses this (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], pp. 260-262), points out the irony, that this strong warning in Hebrews could give rise to a system that was quite similar to the Jewish sacrificial system that Hebrews dismisses as forever superceded! Any system that teaches the loss of salvation or penance to restore it is contrary to God's free grace in Christ.

A second view is that the author is talking about genuine believers who renounce the faith, but the punishment he describes is not hell, but some awful temporal judgment (Zane Hodges, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. by John Walvoord & Roy Zuck [Victor Books], 2:805). This view is in line with Mr. Hodges' non-lordship salvation view, that a person can believe in Christ, subsequently deny and strongly oppose the faith, and yet he will be saved, although he will lose his rewards (1 Cor. 3:15). Apart from the many problems with non-lordship salvation, in our text the judgment is described as "the fury of a fire that will consume the adversaries" (10:27). Limiting this to temporal judgment, no matter how severe, does not do justice to the severity of the warnings.

A third view is that the author is warning true believers, who cannot possibly lose their salvation, about what would happen to them if they did apostatize (which true believers cannot do). So, it is a hypothetical warning used to frighten believers away from leaving the faith (Homer Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* [Baker], pp. 206-207). But, as I argued when we studied Hebrews 6, a hypothetical warning is really pointless. If these people were truly regenerate, how could God hypothetically cast them into hell if they hypothetically apostatized, none of which is possible? This entire line of thinking makes no sense to me.

The correct explanation, as I understand it, is that the passage is warning those who have made a profession of faith and have associated themselves with the church, of the danger of God's eternal judgment if they turn back to Judaism. These people outwardly seem to be regenerate, but they are not truly so. To abandon Christ's sacrifice and to return to Judaism would show that they had never truly trusted Christ in the first place.

The main difficulty for this view is the phrase "by which he was sanctified" (10:29). There are several ways that those who take this view explain the phrase. John Owen (*An Exposition of Hebrews* [The National Foundation for Christian Education], 4:545) argues that it does not refer to the apostate, but to Christ Himself, "who was sanctified and dedicated unto God to be an eternal high priest, by the blood of the covenant which he offered unto God...." This is possible grammatically, although it seems to force into the context something that is specifically taught in John 17:19, but only alluded to in Hebrews (2:10; 5:7, 9; 9:11, 12).

A second way to understand "sanctified" is that it refers to *outward* sanctification in the sense of being identified with God's people, but not to the person's true heart condition before God. This outward sanctification may have been through baptism or communion. The person is "set apart" from the world in the sense that he has joined with the church and its ordinances. He sits under the preaching of the Word and even agrees with it intellectually (10:26, he has received "the knowledge of the truth"). But his heart has not been transformed by God's saving grace. When pressure comes to turn away from Christ due to persecution or temptation to sin, he shows his true colors by repudiating his faith in Christ.

This terrible sin (further described in 10:29) puts the apostate on the path toward certain, terrifying judgment.

This view is in line with the interpretation that I took of 6:4-8. The difficulty of the view, I admit, is that you must take the word "sanctified" in an outward sense (contrary to its use in 10:10 & 14, but in line with 9:13). But in spite of this difficulty, I think that it best fits the context of Hebrews. It also lines up with 10:39, which contrasts those who shrink back to destruction with those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

With that as an overview, let's work through the text, which falls into three sections.

1. To reject Christ willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth is to reject God's only sacrifice for sins and to fall under His certain, terrifying judgment (10:26-27).

When the author says, "if we go on sinning willfully," he is not talking about the "normal" sins that every believer commits. If he were, then who could be saved, because no one has ever lived without sin after salvation! While we do sometimes sin inadvertently, most of our sins are willful! We sin because we choose to sin! But the Bible is clear that if we sin, God graciously forgives and cleanses us when we confess our sins (1 John 1:7-9).

"Sinning willfully" refers to what Numbers 15:30 calls sins of defiance, for which there was no sacrifice available. Commentators compare such sins to the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, representing an unpardonable sin of "high treason and revolt against God" (Walter Kaiser, *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament*, p. 132, cited by Ronald Allen, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 2:830). To go on sinning willfully means deliberately and knowingly to renounce the faith by repudiating Christ's sacrifice for sins. It is a total defection from the faith in Christ as Savior.

The only ones who can commit this sin are those who have received "the knowledge of the truth." These people had come into the church and had heard teaching on the meaning and significance of the death of Christ, such as the author has just given (10:1-18). These apostates knew that Christ is God's only, once-for-all sacrifice, who fulfilled and thus abolished the Old Testament sacrificial

system. They knew the truth about the person of Christ and His exalted role as High Priest.

Yet even so, some were forsaking the assembly of the church and returning to Judaism (10:25). The author is saying that to make such a choice is to trample on the Son of God and to treat His shed blood as worthless. It is to turn from the only way of salvation to an obsolete system that never could remove the guilt of sins (10:4). It is to place oneself on the side of God's adversaries. All that awaits them is not salvation, but a "terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire that will consume the adversaries." The word "terrifying" is emphatic in the Greek. He repeats it in 10:31 (the only other NT occurrence is in 12:21). He wants to hit us with the frightening consequences of turning away from Christ!

2. If the Law of Moses had stiff penalties for disregarding it, the penalty will be much greater for spurning the Son of God who fulfilled the Law (10:28-29).

In verse 28, the author states what every Jew knew well: If a person brazenly defied the Law of Moses, he or she was to be stoned to death on the evidence of two or three witnesses (Deut. 17:2-6). There was no place for mercy or a second chance (Deut. 13:8). The Law was to be applied to all (see Lev. 24:10-23; Num. 15:32-36). The author has just shown how that Jesus is greater than Moses (Heb. 3:1-6). He is a superior priest to the Levitical priests (5:1-10; 7:1-28). He inaugurated the new covenant, which is better than the old (8:6-13). He is the better sacrifice (9:23). So the author is saying, in effect, "In light of the superiority of Jesus to Moses, and in light of the severity of punishment under Moses, go figure what will happen to the person who deliberately rejects Christ!"

He describes such apostates by three phrases. First, he "has trampled under foot the Son of God." To trample something under foot is to treat it as completely worthless. The use of the title, "Son of God," seems "to indicate that the form of apostasy in view involves a scornful denial of the deity of Christ" (Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 422). It means repudiating all that the author has argued for ten chapters on the supremacy and superiority of Jesus Christ, who is God's final word to us. He is the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of His nature, and He upholds all things by the word of His power

(1:1-3). To treat this exalted Son of God like a bug under one's foot is an indescribably horrific sin!

Second, such an apostate "has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified." The first charge trashed the *person* of Christ. This one despises His *work* on the cross. I have already explained that the best way to understand "sanctified" is in an outward sense, of being set apart with God's people through public worship and outward confession of Christ. "To regard as unclean" means, literally, "to treat as common." It may refer to partaking of communion even though his faith was not genuine, and so profaning the cup representing the blood of the covenant (Hughes, p. 423). Or, it could mean viewing the death of Jesus as a common death. The apostates shrugged off any vicarious, substitutionary significance to Christ's death. Maybe they viewed His death as a noble tragedy, but nothing more. By so doing, they treated the blood of the new covenant as commonplace.

The third charge was that the apostates had "insulted the Spirit of grace." (This is the only time this phrase is applied to the Holy Spirit; but see Zech. 12:10.) He imparts God's undeserved favor to us through the sacrifice of God's own Son. The phrase shows that the author viewed the Holy Spirit as a person, not as just an influence, since He could be insulted. "Insulted" has a nuance of arrogance or insolence ("hubris" comes from the Greek word). This is similar to the unpardonable blasphemy against the Spirit of which Jesus spoke. (Matt. 12:31-32). For a guilty sinner to spit in God's face when His Spirit offers a free pardon made possible through the death of God's Son is simply outrageous.

Picture a man lying in the gutter in rags, covered with sores, hungry and homeless. He is there because of his own sinful choices. A kind, generous man offers to take this man to the hospital, pay all of his bills, and then to bequeath on him all that he would ever need in life. He would have a comfortable home, all the food he could eat, and every comfort he could dream of. But the ungrateful wretch in the gutter spits in the man's face, curses at him, and then tells others that the man's offer was worthless. That would not be as bad as insulting the Spirit of grace by turning your back on the free pardon that He offers through the blood of Jesus Christ! The person who spurns God's grace in Christ deserves far

greater punishment than physical death by stoning. He will suffer justly throughout eternity.

3. We know that God's judgment is as certain as His Word, and it will be terrifying (10:30-31).

Even though he has been issuing this strong warning, the author has all along included himself with his readers by using the first person plural ("Let us," 10:22, 23, 24; "we," 10:26, 30). Here he says, "For we know Him who said," and then he cites two references from the Song of Moses (Deut. 32:35, 36). As we have seen before (3:7; 8:8; 10:15), for this author what Scripture says, God says. The first quote establishes God's sole right to take vengeance, but here the emphasis is on the fact that those who wrong such a Being as God have no chance of escape. You may wrong another person and somehow manage to escape his vengeance. But God *will* repay!

The second quote in its original context has the nuance of God vindicating His people by judging their enemies. Although the apostates had formerly been associated with God's people, their rebellion has put them on the side of God's adversaries (10:27). They will not escape. Leaving the fellowship and repudiating the sacrifice of Christ does not remove them from judgment, but rather, places them squarely in line for judgment! As Hughes says (p. 426), "So far from escaping from God, the apostate falls into the hands of the living God: he abandons God as his Savior only to meet him as his Judge." So the author concludes, "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God." He is trying, quite literally, to scare the hell out of them!

The Apostle John (Rev. 6:12-17) describes the terror of God's judgment as it overtakes kings and commanders, the rich and the poor. After a great earthquake, the sun turns black and the moon turns blood red. The stars fall to earth and the sky splits apart. Mountains and islands move out of their places. Hiding themselves in caves and among the rocks of the mountains, everyone cries out to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"

## Conclusion

Sometimes people will say, "I don't believe in a God of judgment. My God is a God of love." If you subscribe to that view, then your "god" is not the living God who reveals Himself through His Word! In one of the earliest records of God's revelation of Himself, He said to Moses, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin." [So far, we all cheer, "Yeah! That's my kind of God!"] But keep going: "yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations" (Exod. 34:6-7).

You may protest, "But that's the God of the Old Testament. I believe in Jesus, who was always gentle and kind." Really? I again remind you that Jesus spoke more often about the terrors of hell than anyone else in the Bible. He called it a place "where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48, citing Isa. 66:24). He said that the punishment for one who causes one of His little ones to stumble would be far worse than if he had a millstone hung around his neck and was cast into the sea (Mark 9:42). He described hell as a place of outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12; 24:51). He said that it's better to pluck out your eye or cut off your hand than for your whole body to go to hell (Matt. 5:29, 30). He described the rich man in hell as being in agony in the flames (Luke 16:24). He further described those flames as "eternal fire," which is the same word used for "eternal life" (Matt. 25:41, 46).

Also, our text is in the New Testament, and its very argument is that judgment will be *more severe* for rejecting the Son of God than it was for the one in the Old Testament who disregarded the Law. The God of both Testaments is the same God, who is rich in mercy and love towards all who repent of their sins and trust in Christ. But He is terrifying in His judgment against those who reject His Son, who is the only sacrifice for sin.

Note carefully who is *most in danger* of committing this terrible sin of turning away from Christ: it is *those who knew the truth* and who had associated with God's people! It is not those who are notori-

ous sinners. It is those who think, "I'm a child of Abraham! I'm not a sinner like the Gentiles! I keep the Law. I offer my sacrifices. That's good enough! I don't need a crucified Savior and His blood to atone for my sins!" In other words, it's the church-going religious person who does not see his need for the blood of Christ!

I once conducted a funeral where I got to the service and read the little bulletin that the mortuary prints up. It quoted John 3:16 as follows: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall have eternal life." It omitted "*shall not perish!*" I don't know whether the mortuary or the family of the deceased man was responsible, but I didn't let them get away with it! I called attention to this glaring omission and made the point: If you do not put your trust in Christ, you will perish!

The *only* options are: *Christ or judgment?* If you reject Christ after hearing the gospel and being associated with God's people, you will fall into the hands of the living God, and it will be an eternally terrifying ordeal! You don't want to go there! But if you entrust yourself into the hands of Christ, which were pierced for you, you will find God's abundant mercy and grace to cover all your sins!

### Discussion Questions

1. Some evangelicals have denied the doctrine of hell as being "morally repugnant" and not worthy of God. How would you answer this charge?
2. Why should it send off warning signals when someone pits the "Old Testament God" against the "New Testament God"?
3. Is it biblically correct to tell sinners, "God loves you" or should we (with Edwards) say, "God is angry with you"?
4. List as many practical benefits as you can from the doctrine of hell.

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