

FOR WHOM DOES HEBREWS 10:26-31 TEACH A “PUNISHMENT WORSE THAN DEATH”?

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Hebrews 10:26-31 stands as one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the entire NT. The thought that there is a sin one can commit that results in God’s fiery judgment as a punishment *worse than death* is sobering. In an attempt to find a satisfactory explanation, one typically retreats prematurely to his theology without doing full justice to an exegesis of the text. If one is predisposed to Reformed theology, then he will likely view those addressed in this warning passage as mere *professors* of the Christian faith who have never truly been regenerated, and their punishment is nothing less than eternity in hell. Those of an Arminian persuasion, on the other hand, take the original audience to be genuine believers who renounce their faith in Christ, and for that they must face the punishment of eternity in hell.

Ironically, both theologies agree on the end result of the punishment: eternity in hell. In this article, I will make a case that this passage is not talking about a punishment in hell, and that this passage has something very serious to say to all believers. In doing so, three crucial interpretative questions will be addressed. First, in light of the context, who are those being warned and what is their spiritual status? Second, what exactly is the nature of the sin that the author has in mind? Third, what is the punishment that awaits the person who fails to heed the warning, and when is this encountered?

I. THE IDENTITY OF THOSE BEING WARNED

It is imperative that we first take careful notice of the context in which this passage occurs. Beginning in Hebrews 8, the author has sought to elucidate the significance of the sacrifice that the Lord Jesus Christ has made in presenting His own precious blood in the heavenly tabernacle. Indeed, this sacrifice (presented in the very presence of God Himself) has secured once and for all the foundation of the New Cove-

nant promised long ago in Jeremiah 31. Furthermore, this sacrifice has achieved what the blood of bulls and goats could never achieve, namely, perfect and absolute forgiveness of sins before God (note especially Heb 10:11-18).

Having completed his doctrinal presentation, the author of Hebrews immediately turns (beginning in 10:19) to exhort his readers to respond obediently and faithfully to the High Priestly work of Christ. Yet his concern is not merely that they *know* about Christ's sacrifice, but that they *take action* and respond appropriately. Their response must include holding fast "the confession of our hope without wavering" (10:23). The author had first mentioned their "confession" as early as Heb 3:1, where he had referred to the readers as "holy brethren." He used the adjective "holy" (*hagios*) to describe them, precisely because they had been "sanctified" (*hagiazō*) by the "leader of their salvation" (2:10-11).¹

Furthermore, those partaking of this sanctification (at the new birth) are those whom He is not ashamed to call "brethren" (2:11). There should be no mistaking that after this careful definition of "brethren" in chapter two, subsequent references throughout the book clearly have in mind "genuine believers."² For this reason, his address to them as "brethren" at the beginning of the exhortation section in Heb 10:19 is most significant. What he has to say to them beginning in 10:19 and continuing throughout the remainder of the chapter is clearly an exhortation to believers.

That these brethren—fellow Christians—are exhorted to "hold fast [their] confession" (10:23) is all the more significant in light of the following words "our hope." What does he mean by "the confession of our hope"? For the author of Hebrews, "our hope" is the very blood of Christ that has been presented in the heavenly tabernacle on our behalf. This explains why he could write in Heb 6:19, "This hope we have as an

¹ In view of the context of Hebrews 2, "sanctify" refers to *positional sanctification*. Verses 9 and 10 make reference to "the suffering of death," His "tasting death for everyone," and His "sufferings." Hence, He is their *sanctifier* by virtue of His death on the cross for them.

² For an excellent and more exhaustive defense of the author's use of the term *brethren* for genuine Christians, see John Niemelä, "No More Sacrifice," Part 1 of 2, *CTSJ* 4:4 (Oct 98): 2-17.

anchor of the soul, a *hope* both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil.”³ They are to *hold fast* this confession!

Note that he did not exhort them to examine themselves to ascertain whether or not they had ever made this confession. If the original audience of Hebrews were Jewish believers—as I and many other commentators maintain—a reference to their “confession” was quite *à propos*. Their previous confession that Jesus was their Messiah was simultaneously a confession that they were trusting in His shed blood on their behalf as their ultimate hope before God. They must not relinquish this all important confession, which is precisely the same point that the author had confronted the readers with in Heb 3:6, when he exhorted them to hold fast their confidence and the boast of their hope *firm until the end*.

What I have sought to argue for thus far is that the warning passage in Heb 10:26-31 is cast in a context of exhortation to true believers who needed to hold fast the confession of their hope in the blood of Christ on their behalf. The alternative, obviously, was that they might not “hold fast.” Hence, when he writes in Heb 10:26, “For if *we* sin,” he must be thinking of the very same ones he had begun to exhort in Heb 10:19 and following. (Notice that by using “we,” the author includes himself within the scope of the warning.)

Yet the following context also argues that those being warned are true believers. Immediately following the warning passage of 10:26-31, he turns their attention to the former days, “when after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings.” At some point in their past, they had suffered greatly for their faith. The author very specifically says that this took place after they had been “enlightened,” i.e., after the time of their conversion. Furthermore, it would be quite out of keeping with what we know of first-century Christianity, if these Jewish readers would have suffered for the sake of Christ had they not been genuinely converted. Indeed, even further on in the paragraph the author tells them that their real need is for *endurance*, not for believing the gospel (10:36). Thus, the following paragraph, i.e., Heb 10:32-39, supports our thesis that the context has genuine Christians in view.⁴

³ Take notice in 10:20 to the reference of the veil in connection with the “new and living way.” Obviously, the author is thinking of the heavenly tabernacle, not the earthly one.

⁴ We could also make mention of the phrase “My righteous one” in Heb 10:38 to buttress this view. In composing vv 37-38, the author draws from the

Lastly, we turn to consider a factor from within our paragraph of concern that substantiates that those being warned are true Christians, namely, the reference to being “sanctified” in Heb 10:29. The author’s warning is directed at those who would “regard as unclean the blood of the covenant *by which he was sanctified*” (italics added). This author has detected at least eight different views about the interpretation of this verse. For example, F. F. Bruce held that the blood was their “only hope,” i.e., the blood *alone* can sanctify his people.⁵ Similarly, Philip E. Hughes felt that the verse was only speaking of the *potential* to sanctify the person.⁶ Yet both of these views must be ruled out by virtue of the grammar. The word *sanctified* is an aorist indicative passive of the verb *hagiazō*, which looks at an actual accomplished event, not something that was merely potential or an only hope.⁷

John MacArthur takes the position that the pronoun *he* refers to Christ, not the apostate—it is Christ who is sanctified (i.e., set apart).⁸ Weeks took the position that it is the “covenant” that is sanctified by the blood (which would involve changing the translation to “by which *it* was

LXX rendering of Isa 26:20 and Hab 2:3-4 to remind them that their endurance should be focused on the Lord’s return—“for yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay.” In so doing, the author has expressed a Messianic understanding of Hab 2:3. This is significant for the author of Hebrews, for the next verse of Habakkuk focuses on the “righteous one” who is expected to live by faith. In quoting from Hab 2:4, however, the author of Hebrews has deliberately reversed the lines. He first cites Hab 2:4b and then 2:4a, apparently to accentuate the words “my righteous one.” Ellingworth adds, “The restructuring of the verse means that the subject of *huposteilētai* is no longer ‘the vision,’ as in the LXX, by ‘my righteous one.’ This supports the author’s presupposition that his readers are all believers (and thus ‘righteous’), but that some of them are in danger of shrinking back from the life of faith” (Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews; A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 555.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the NT, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 262.

⁶ Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 423.

⁷ The aorist verb *hēgiasthē* in 10:29 is best understood as a *constative aorist*. An *ingressive* use of the aorist must be ruled out by virtue of *hagiazō* in the perfect tense in Heb 10:10.

⁸ John MacArthur, *Hebrews* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 279.

sanctified”).⁹ Leon Morris argues that only *initial sanctification* is involved, i.e., the apostate experienced an initial act in the sanctifying process, yet one that fell short of regeneration.¹⁰ Peterson attempted to argue that the apostate had been sanctified in the sense that he was *covenantally set apart* as ‘belonging to God,’ though not actually regenerated.¹¹

Stedman felt that the apostate only *professed* to be sanctified, i.e., he regarded himself as holy by the blood.¹² These latter five views, however, are all extremely doubtful in light of the way that the word for “sanctify” (*hagiāzō*) is used in Hebrews. In his doctrinal argument about the sacrifice of Christ (chaps 9–10), the author instructed his readers that “by this will we have been *sanctified* through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (10:10, italics added; cf. 2:11). A few verses later, he indicated that the benefit of Christ’s sacrifice (which brings eternal forgiveness) is for the *sanctified*: “For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (10:14). In these verses, the author uses “sanctification” in the sense of justification, not as progressive conformity to the image of Christ, and most commentators understand it that way in light of the context of Christ’s atoning sacrifice. Hence, F. F. Bruce concludes,

The sanctification which his people receive in consequence is their inward cleansing from sin and their being made fit for the presence of God, so that henceforth they can offer him acceptable worship. It is a sanctification which has taken place once for all; in this sense it is as unrepeatable as the sacrifice which effects it.¹³

The reference, therefore, in Heb 10:29 to having been “sanctified” clearly has in mind what was just said earlier in this same chapter. It is *believers* who have been sanctified by Christ’s perfect atoning sacrifice. It is not Christ who is sanctified. It is not the covenant which is

⁹ N. Weeks, “Admonition and Error in Hebrews,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 39 (1976), 80.

¹⁰ Leon Morris, “Hebrews,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 107.

¹¹ Robert A. Peterson, “Apostasy,” *Presbyterion* 19 (Spr 1993), 25.

¹² Ray C. Stedman, *Hebrews*, The IVP NT Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 112.

¹³ Bruce, 243.

sanctified! Furthermore, the verse says nothing about a *potential* of being sanctified or of being *covenantally set apart*. The contextual use of *hagi-azō* in this chapter warrants against any such suggestion.

Finally, I would agree with others (e.g., McKnight) who have pointed out that those in danger in Heb 10:26-31 are one and the same as those in Hebrews 6.¹⁴ The characteristics of those in view in Heb 6:4-5 (those whom he hopes will move on to maturity) are convincingly *Christian*, as I have argued elsewhere.¹⁵

Taking the context before and after Heb 10:26-31 into consideration as well as the *clue* in 10:29 that the potential apostate has been “sanctified,” those in danger of judgment in this passage are clearly true regenerate Christians. This is the position not only held by proponents of the Free Grace movement, but that of many notable commentators.¹⁶ We

¹⁴ Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *Trinity Journal* 13 (Spring 1992), 45-48.

¹⁵ J. Paul Tanner, “‘But If It Yields Thorns and Thistles’: An Exposition of Hebrews 5:11–6:12,” *JOTGES* 14:26 (Spring 2001): 19-42. Cf. Randall C. Gleason, “The OT Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8,” *BibSac* 155 (Jan-Mar 1998): 62-91.

¹⁶ Representatives of this position from the Free Grace perspective include Zane Hodges, “Hebrews,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, NT edition, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), 805; Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1992), 463; Thomas Kem Oberholtzer, “The Danger of Willful Sin in Hebrews 10:26-39; Part 4 of The Warning Passages in Hebrews,” *BibSac* 145:580 (Oct-Dec 1988), 414; and Robert Wilkin, “A Punishment Worse Than Death (Hebrews 10:26-31),” *The Grace Evangelical Society News* 7:6 (Sep-Oct 1992), 2-3.

Other notable commentators who take the original audience to be regenerate Christians include R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and The Epistle of James* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966), 360; Brooke F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1892; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 331; I. H. Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (London: Epworth, 1969), 148; William L. Lane, *Hebrews*, Word Biblical Commentaries, 2 vols. (Dallas: Word, 1991), 2:294; J. Dwight Pentecost, *A Faith That Endures* (Grand Rapids: Discovery, 1992), 177; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 540; and Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages,” 38.

must now seek to understand the nature of the sin that they are in danger of committing.

II. THE NATURE OF THE SIN

Verse 26, the opening verse of the paragraph, raises the issue that there is some type of sin (or sins) that would warrant God's punishment. The question needs to be addressed as to whether the author is thinking of a particular type of sin or (in a more general sense) of *continuance* in sin. The latter is implied by many translations. The *NIV*, for instance, implies that the issue is one of continuance in a lifestyle of sin: "If we deliberately *keep on sinning*" (italics added). The words "keep on" have been added by the translators to reflect their understanding of the present participle meaning "to sin" (*hamartanontōn*), though the grammar certainly does not demand *persistent* action.¹⁷

In a similar construction in Heb 10:1, we have the conjunction "for" (*gar*) with a present tense circumstantial participle (though "causal") and followed later in the sentence by a present tense main verb. Yet the participle does not express persistent action, but mere statement of fact: "For the Law, *since it has* [not *keeps on having*] only a shadow...can never make perfect" (italics added).¹⁸ There are certain constructions in which a present tense verb might be used to reflect persistent action, but that has to be carefully decided on the basis of context.

¹⁷ One would do well to read the comments about the verbal use of the participle in Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 614-16. I would add, on the basis of my examination, that the present tense participle when used with a present tense main verb, far more often means *mere statement of fact* and rarely persistent action. In most cases where a present tense verb *could* be taken in the sense of persistent action, it could just as well be taken in the sense of mere acknowledgment of fact. For instance, we have a present participle (*tous hamartanontas*) in 1 Tim 5:20, but the translations handle this differently. The *NASB* translates "Those who *continue in sin*, rebuke in the presence of all," whereas the *NIV* translates "Those who *sin* are to be rebuked publicly" (italics added).

¹⁸ Another similar situation involving a present tense circumstantial participle arises in Heb 4:14, yet once again the point is not *persistence* of action but mere acknowledgment of fact: "*Since therefore we have* (*echontes*—present participle) a great high priest...*let us hold fast* (*kratōmen*—present subjunctive) the confession" (italics added).

Since the grammar alone does not determine whether the author has in mind *a continual state of sinning* or the fact that a certain sin is done, we must look closely at the context to determine his point. The context, I believe, suggests that the author is thinking of a particular sin rather than a lifestyle in which one *continues* to sin. The first clue stems from the preceding paragraph, in which the author had just exhorted his readers to “hold fast their confession of hope without wavering.” The fact that he had expressed the same concern earlier in the book underscores the significance of this action (cf. 3:6; 4:14). He was obviously concerned that they might abandon their confession, and the fact that he reiterates this again in chapter 10 reflects that this was uppermost in his thinking.

A more significant clue is to be found in the author’s choice to use the adverb *hekousiōs*, translated “deliberately” or “willingly.” Several commentators have pointed out that Heb 10:26 may have some relationship with the OT concept of “intentional sin” in Num 15:22-31, although the lexical connections with this passage are usually overlooked. The adverb *hekousiōs* does suggest a connection.

The passage in Numbers 15 is concerned with transgression of the Mosaic Law. If the violation was not intentional (they were unaware that the Law was being violated), then an acknowledgment along with an appropriate sacrifice was to be made.¹⁹ This could happen at either the individual level or community level. Num 15:22-26 describes the community situation, whereas Num 15:27-31 describes the individual situation. Furthermore, the individual situation is divided into two parts: vv 27-29 prescribe what to do when the sin is unintentional, and vv 30-31 handle the case where the violation of the Law was done intentionally or *willfully* (with full knowledge and purposeful transgression). The latter was termed sin “of a high hand” (Heb *bēyād rāmāh*).²⁰

¹⁹ Harrison notes, “These transgressions could include actions undertaken in ignorance of Levitical law, inadvertent neglect or violation of Tabernacle or priestly protocol, or some other social misdemeanor that, although unintentional in nature, had the effect of violating the sanctity of the whole community of priests. Because the transgression was not deliberate, no specific moral guilt was attached to it” (R. K. Harrison, *Numbers*, The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1990], 225).

²⁰ Ashley points out that not all intentional sin was considered sin “of a high hand.” The latter “differs from the intentional sin described in Lev. 5:20-26 (Eng. 6:1-7) for which a reparation offering may be made, ‘when the offender

The LXX translators rendered the phrase “by a high hand” with the Greek words *en cheiri hyperēphanias*, meaning “by an arrogant or defiant hand.” Verse 30 goes on to say that in doing so, “he has reviled the LORD.” Consequently, that one is to be “cut off” from the people, i.e., to be put to death.²¹ The point is, in contrast to the preceding situations, the violator had no recourse to a sacrifice but was left with the severe alternative of judgment by capital punishment.

If the author of Hebrews has this situation in mind, that would do a lot to explain Heb 10:26. That he probably does have Num 15:22-31 in mind is borne out by his deliberate use of the words *hekousiōs* and *hamartanō* to describe the concept “to sin intentionally.”²² Recognition of the lexical play upon Num 15:22-31 is significant to our exegesis of Heb 10:26. The issue in Numbers 15 was not *persistence in sin* but a certain kind of sin that was so serious as to warrant death. Likewise, the author of Hebrews is thinking of a *particular kind of sin*—one that would be for the New Covenant believer what “sin of a high hand” had been to the Old Covenant believer. Furthermore, when the author of Hebrews says “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,” he still has the Numbers 15 passage in mind. When one committed “sin of a high hand,” he had to realize that he had crossed the point of no return—there was no

feels guilty’ (5:23, 26)” (Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 288).

²¹ For the idea of the Hebrew verb *kārat* meaning “put to death,” see Exod 31:14 (cf. *BDB* 504b 1b). The LXX translators rendered *kārat* in v 30 by *exsolethreuthēsetai* (from *exsolethreuō*), meaning “to be utterly destroyed.”

²² Although this phrase is not used in the Numbers 15 passage, the antithetical expression “to sin unintentionally” does employ the lexical antonym of *hekousiōs*, namely *aekousios*. The presence of *aekousios* in Num 15:22-31 takes on even greater significance when it is observed that the word occurs four times in vv 24-29, and a verb form of *akousiazō* occurs in v 28. In fact, the idea “to sin unintentionally” is expressed in v 27 by the Greek phrase *hamartē akousiōs* (with the aorist subj. active of *hamartanō*). Thus, if Moses uses *aekousios* and *hamartanō* to describe the concept of “sinning unintentionally,” it would be logically deduced that the opposite idea (“to sin intentionally”) would be expressed by *hekousiōs* and *hamartanō*—which is exactly what the author of Hebrews has done. We should also note that the author of Hebrews employs the word “sacrifice” (*thusia*) along with the phrase “for sins” (*peri hamartiōn*), both of which occur in Num 15:24.

sacrifice available that could undo the damage. He could only expect judgment in the form of death. Likewise, the author of Hebrews is thinking of a most serious sin in which the believer will have crossed the point of no return—where he can only expect God’s severe judgment. There is a certain irony in all this, however, for the author of Hebrews had stated only a few verses earlier that Christ had “offered one sacrifice for sins for all time” (10:12).²³ How sad it would be that a believer would come to the point of abandoning his confidence in Christ (and His once and for all sacrifice for sins), only to discover that his “willful sin” would leave him no alternative sacrifice to deter God’s judgment.

The preceding discussion leads us to the conclusion that in the case of Heb 10:26, a better translation than “If we deliberately *keep on sinning*” would be the translation “For if we *sin willfully* after receiving the knowledge of the truth,” which is precisely what the *NKJV* has done. The latter puts the stress on the doing of a certain type of sin rather than the continual doing of sin in general. What makes this sin in Heb 10:26 so tragic is that it is done “after receiving the knowledge of the truth.” Some have thought this phrase only means that the guilty one had *some enlightenment*—some understanding of the gospel—but decided in the final analysis to reject Christ’s atoning work (and thus never to have entered into His salvation).²⁴ However, the words “the knowledge of the truth” are found at least four times in the Pastoral Epistles and are consistently used of authentic Christian experience.²⁵ In 1 Tim 2:4, for instance, Paul refers to God our Savior “who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Lane concludes that this is a technical expression,

This technical expression refers to the acceptance of life in response to the preaching of the gospel... The phrase thus describes a dynamic assimilation of the truth of the gospel. It is

²³ In Heb 10:26, the author of Hebrews uses the Greek phrase *peri hamartiōn...thusia* to express a “sacrifice for sins,” whereas in Heb 10:12, Christ’s sacrifice is *huper hamartiōn...thusian*. Although there is no apparent significant difference in meaning (note 1 Pet 3:18), he may have been influenced by the Numbers 15 passage which uses *peri hamartias* (three times!—vv 24, 25 and 27). Cf. Heb 5:3.

²⁴ R. Stedman, *Hebrews*, 110; and P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 419.

²⁵ 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Tim 2:25; 3:7; and Titus 1:1.

an equivalent expression for the solemn description of authentic Christian experience in 6:4-5.²⁶

The author's reference in Heb 10:32 to their sufferings after "having been enlightened" would support Lane's conclusion. Certainly the sin in view in Heb 10:26 is one involving authentic Christians, not those who had merely professed to have believed at some point in the past. The question now remains as to what is in store for rebellious Christians who commit this New Covenant type of "willful sin."

III. THE PUNISHMENT IN STORE FOR THE NEW COVENANT REBELS

In Heb 10:26, the author has brought to the attention of his Hebrew Christian audience that there is a New Covenant counterpart to the Old Covenant "willful sin." This sin amounts to a decisive and final repudiation of their faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ in order to return to the Old Covenant sacrificial system. Just as the wilderness generation utterly rebelled at Kadesh Barnea and God basically said, "Enough is enough," a similar situation can occur for those under the New Covenant. This is precisely why the author of Hebrews draws that parallel in chapters 3-4. There is a point where God's judgment will surely fall on those who rebel.

A. THE PUNISHMENT IS NOT HELL

In discussing this judgment, we must remember that one's eternal destiny is sealed forever the moment he or she places faith in Jesus Christ. Here we would do well to remember such verses as Rom 8:29-30 and John 10:28. Though faith in Christ and His work on the cross protects the child of God from eternal judgment in hell, it does not guarantee that all judgment will be averted. Christ's perfect sacrifice does not avert the judgment for "willful sin" any more than His sacrifice would avert God's chastisement upon a believer who had committed adultery or had

²⁶ Lane, *Hebrews*, 2:292. Schmitz concurs, "The knowledge of God's truth is of equal importance with experiential profession of the Lord, and finally pushes it into the background. Hence, conversion to the Christian faith can be described almost technically as coming to a knowledge (*epignōsis*) of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Tim. 3:7; cf. Heb. 10:26; 1 Tim. 5:3; 2 Tim. 2:25; Tit. 1:1; 2 Pet. 2:21)" (Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of NT Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976], s.v. "knowledge," by E. D. Schmitz).

drunk of the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner (1 Cor 11:27-30). The NT is clear that believers can (and do) commit sin that results in God's judgment and discipline, though they have God's eternal forgiveness of such sin through Christ's sacrifice on their behalf.

We must be careful not to over-read Heb 10:26b. Commensurate with Num 15:22-31, the author is simply saying that once such a serious sin is committed (abandoning their confession), there is no sacrifice they can offer that will avert God's judgment.²⁷ He is making them aware that they will certainly face some form of judgment from God—though he does not say precisely what that judgment will be. For the Old Covenant community, the judgment was of a temporal nature—capital punishment—not eternal punishment in hell, and the recognition of this fact should guide us in drawing the appropriate parallel.

Hebrews 10:27 underscores the point that they could expect a very severe judgment from God. In fact, he labels it “a terrifying expectation of judgment.” The second half of the verse is an allusion to Isa 26:11, and the use of the word “fire” from that verse has suggested to some that eternal torment in hell must be in view.²⁸ Stedman, for instance, writes, “it is to experience after death the eternal judgment of raging fire.”²⁹ Yet

²⁷ For the author of Hebrews, the sin of “abandoning one's confession” must be a very hardened state and not a mere momentary denouncing of Christ. Even Peter denied the Lord three times, yet he was forgiven and went on to become one of the great Apostles of the first century. Westcott concluded about the apostate of Hebrews 10, “His conduct shews that he has already abandoned his faith, and that too after he had made trial of its blessings. His decision, expressed in deed, is regarded as complete and final” (330).

²⁸ Six of the final seven words from Heb 10:27 are found in the LXX translation of Isa 26:11. Both *edetai* and *esthiein* are forms of the verb *esthiō*. The word *zēlos* in Heb 10:27 seems to have been inserted under the influence of the preceding line in Isa 26:11. Hebrews 10:27 adds the word *mellontos*, a word often used in Hebrews with eschatological overtones (note Heb 1:14; 2:5; 6:5; 10:1; 13:14). There could also be an influence of Isa 26:21, “The LORD is *about to come out* from His place” (understanding the Heb participle *yōsē* as “future instance”; so *NASB*).

²⁹ R. Stedman, 113. Similarly, Hughes says, “his end is perdition” (420). Westcott is vague, but calls it “condemnation” and later “fatal punishment” (329). The inference about “enemies” (*hupenantious*) at the end of v 27 has also been used to argue that those judged are “God's enemies,” thus deserving hell

such a conclusion is unwarranted. Since the author customarily thinks with OT events in mind, it should not be thought surprising that he might be doing so here. Thus we should consider more carefully how the metaphor of fire is used in the OT.

Fire is associated with judgment in the OT in other ways than hell. For instance, we have the case of Nadab and Abihu (Levitical priests) in Lev 10:1-3 who dishonored the LORD by using the firepans in an inappropriate way, such that “fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them.” In another incident, Korah (a Levitical priest) along with Dathan and Abiram and 250 leading men of Israel (the latter being Levites also; Num 16:8-10) challenged the leadership of Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16). The issue apparently was jealousy of the exalted positions that Moses and his brother Aaron had obtained (both of whom were descended from Levi). Though only Aaron and his descendants could be high priests, the “rebels” themselves were not without privilege—they served as Levitical priests at the tabernacle. As a result, the LORD brought judgment upon those who participated in Korah’s rebellion (since their challenge was really a rebellion against the leadership structure that God Himself had ordained). The ground swallowed up Korah, Dathan and Abiram, while “fire came forth from the LORD and consumed the two hundred and fifty men” (Num 16:35).

If the original context of Isa 26:11 does not have “hell” in view, it is doubtful that the author of Hebrews is thinking of such a punishment. Indeed, the context of Isa 26:11 is appropriate, since that verse paints a contrast between those who are faithful and those who act wickedly among Israel. Of greater significance, however, is the eschatological setting in which this chapter occurs. Chapters 24–27 of Isaiah are a depiction of the coming judgment of God in the “day of the Lord” which is followed by kingdom blessing.³⁰ The unit begins with the announcement

(Morris, 107). Ellingworth, who understands the admonition as being to Christians, assumes that v 27 has in mind “final judgment” (534).

³⁰ Though the phrase “the day of the Lord” is not used in Isaiah 24–27, the abbreviated form “in that day” occurs seven times (24:21; 25:9; 26:1; 27:1, 2, 12, 13). Announcement had been made in Isa 13:9 that “the day of the LORD is coming” (cf. 13:6). This would be “the day of His burning anger” (13:13) in which He would “punish the world for its evil” (13:11). The judgment of this “day” is described in Isaiah 24–27. References to the cosmic disturbances in Isa 24:23 confirm the eschatological setting of this time (cf. Joel 2:10; 2:31; 3:15; Ezek 32:27; Matt 24:29; Luke 21:25; and Rev 6:12; 8:12).

that God will enact a universal judgment upon the earth that has transgressed his commandments (and this theme pervades the whole unit):

Behold, the LORD lays the earth waste, devastates it, distorts its surface, and scatters its inhabitants... The earth will be completely laid waste and completely despoiled, for the LORD has spoken this word (Isa 24:1, 3).

So it will happen in that day, that the LORD will punish the host of heaven, on high, and the kings of the earth, on earth (24:21).

For behold, the LORD is about to come out from His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity (26:21).

God's judgment at this time is likened to a fire. Isaiah 24:6 states, "the inhabitants of the earth are *burned*, and few men are left." Though this will be a terrible time of judgment for the inhabitants of the world, it will be good news for the righteous, since the judgment will be quickly followed by kingdom blessings. The Messianic kingdom (which had been described earlier in Isa 2:1-4; 11:1-10) results from this universal day of judgment. As Isa 24:23 declares, "The LORD of hosts *will reign* on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and His glory will be before His elders."

In 25:6-9, the kingdom is likened unto a "lavish banquet." God's judgment of the wicked, His deliverance of His afflicted ones (note 25:3-5), and the inauguration of the kingdom in which the LORD personally reigns (cf. 32:1; 33:17) are depicted as the "eschatological salvation" for the righteous. They respond, "Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us rejoice and be glad in *His salvation*" (25:9, italics added).³¹

The opening of chapter 26 clarifies that the initiation of the kingdom is a millennial event: "In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah." This also suggests that the call to rejoice in 25:9 primarily has in mind believing Jews in the aftermath of the Great Tribulation, which

³¹ Since the author of Hebrews thinks of "salvation" in primarily eschatological terms, this section of Isaiah would be particularly appropriate to his case (note Heb 1:14; 2:3 with 2:5; and especially 9:28). In fact, his reference in Heb 9:28 to "those who eagerly await him" may have in mind Isa 25:9 (cf. 26:8).

would make the “song” of 26:1ff. particularly relevant to Jewish readers and thus quite appropriate for the author of Hebrews.

This “kingdom song” of the righteous is even more relevant to the Book of Hebrews when we observe that it begins with rejoicing that the righteous and faithful are given the privilege to enter the “strong city”—undoubtedly Jerusalem in this context (24:23; 27:13). The song of Isaiah 26 begins by stating: “We have a strong city...Open the gates, that the righteous nation may enter, the one that remains faithful” (26:1-2). The author of Hebrews held out the eschatological heavenly Jerusalem as the ultimate hope of New Covenant believers: “For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come” (13:14; cf. 11:16; 12:22).

Yet the song goes on to lament that though the inhabitants of the world learn about God’s righteousness when they are made to experience His judgments (in the context, the “day of the Lord”), the wicked “in the land of uprightness” (i.e., Israel) have not learned righteousness” (Isa 26:9-10). The LXX translation for the end of v 10 differs from the Hebrew text: “Let the ungodly one be taken away, that he might not behold the glory of the Lord.”³² Then in Isa 26:11 (following the LXX text), the prophet declares, “O Lord, Your arm is raised high (i.e., posed to strike in judgment), but they do not see it. But when they perceive this, they shall be ashamed. The zeal (of God) shall seize this ignorant people, and then fire shall devour the adversaries.”³³

In both the Hebrew text as well as the LXX translation, the prophet seems to have in mind the wicked among Israel who fall under God’s judgment at the time of the “day of the Lord.” They are in contrast to those in the nation who are trusting in the Lord (26:3-4) and waiting eagerly for Him (26:8). The “fire” depicts God’s judgment against His covenant people (recall 24:6; cf. 5:24-25; 9:19; 29:6; 33:14).³⁴ The fire is a threat to the unrighteous within the nation, but not to the righteous.

³² Failure to see the “glory” (*doxsan*) of the Lord in this verse should be contrasted with those before whom the Lord is glorified (*doxasthēsetai*) when He comes to reign (Isa 24:23). The MT, however, uses two different words (*gē’ût* in 26:10 vs. *kābôd* in 24:23).

³³ On the thought of God’s uplifted arm in judgment, see Isa 5:25; 9:21; 30:30.

³⁴ For other contexts in which “fire” (*pur*) and “zeal” (*zēlos*) are used in combination, see Zeph 1:18; 3:8; Ps 79:5 (LXX = 78:5).

Later Isaiah states, “Sinners in Zion are terrified; trembling has seized the godless. Who among us can live with the consuming fire? Who among us can live with continual burning? He who walks righteously, and speaks with sincerity” (33:14-15).

In these passages in Isaiah, the fiery judgment does not speak of eternal punishment in hell but rather of the eschatological judgment from God that will engulf the whole world and even Israel in particular. How the author of Hebrews envisioned this in relation to his readers is not altogether clear. At the very least, however, we could conclude this: if God does not withhold his awesome judgment against His own covenant people as depicted in Isaiah 24–27, there is no reason to think He would spare those who forsook the New Covenant. That is, if rebellious Jews of the Tribulation will certainly receive God’s judgment, so will those who rebel in the days when the author of Hebrews writes. The allusion to Isa 26:11 would be particularly meaningful to the readers who were of Jewish descent and who should have their hopes set upon the future coming of Messiah to inaugurate His kingdom and the eschatological Jerusalem.³⁵

In conclusion, the punishment envisioned by Heb 10:27 must be interpreted in light of both the context of Hebrews as a whole and the eschatological judgment depicted in Isaiah 24–27. In preparation for kingdom blessing, God will first bring about a fiery judgment that will fall on all the wicked of the world and which will not even spare the rebels within Israel. We must underscore the fact that the “fires of hell” are clearly not in view. At all points within Israel’s broad history, those who turn away in unbelief and rebel against the covenant are in jeopardy of God’s judgment. This was true at Kadesh Barnea in the past, it was

³⁵ There are numerous *conceptual* parallels between chapters 24–27 of Isaiah and the Book of Hebrews that may have prompted the author of Hebrews to utilize Isa 26:11. For example, both have an expectation of the Lord coming to reign and establish His kingdom (note Isa 24:23). Both refer to those who wait for the Lord’s salvation (*sōtēria*), though the terms for “waiting” are different in the Greek (Isa 25:9; Heb 9:28—the term for waiting used by the author of Hebrews [*apekdechomai*] is not found in the LXX). Finally, both refer to “confessing” His name (Isa 26:13; Heb 10:23; 13:15). The author of Hebrews uses the word *homologeō*, a term rarely used in the OT prophets and never by the translators of Isaiah. Isaiah, instead, has *onomazō*.

true for the majority of Jews in Jesus' generation, and it will also prove true in the eventual "day of the Lord."

B. CONTEXTUAL CLUES CONCERNING THE TIME AND NATURE OF THE JUDGMENT

In Heb 10:28-29, the author refers to the OT practice whereby certain people in the covenant community would be put to death for offenses like idolatry and murder. By analogy, he suggests that a New Covenant believer who abandons his confession of faith in Jesus deserves a "worse (or more severe) punishment" (*cheironos timōrias*). Temporal punishment (perhaps a premature death) could be in his mind, as sometimes happened to certain erring Christians in the NT (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor 11:28-31; and 1 John 5:16). Nevertheless, the context seems to demand more, and even suggests that some kind of eschatological judgment may be in store (yet something other than hell).

In Heb 10:25 (the very verse that precedes our paragraph of study), the author had exhorted the readers to encourage one another, "and all the more as you see the day approaching." The conjunction "for" (*gar*) linking v 26 with the preceding paragraph does suggest a logical connection. What did the author have in mind when he spoke of "the day"? Pentecost takes the position that the approaching "day" refers to God's temporal judgment upon the first century generation of Jews at the hands of the Roman general Titus in AD 70.³⁶ This would then be a fulfillment of the judgment that had been announced by Christ on unbelieving Israel who had rejected Him as Messiah (see Matt 23:37-24:2). The problem with this interpretation is that there are clues from the broader context that would associate "the day" with the Second Coming of Christ rather than with an event in the first century.

Most likely "the day" has a connection with the Second Coming. In Heb 9:28, the author had just reminded the readers that Christ would appear a second time. This time it would not be to bear sins (as He had done in His first advent), but to bring "salvation" (*sōtēria*) for those who eagerly awaited Him, i.e., an eschatological salvation-deliverance. This would include the formal establishment of the Messianic kingdom and all things being made subject to Christ that had been spoken of in chapters 1-2. In this light, "the day" of Heb 10:25 probably refers to the eschatological "day of the Lord" often mentioned in Scripture. Although a full-

³⁶ J. Dwight Pentecost, *A Faith That Endures*, 173.

blown study of the “day of the Lord” is beyond the scope of this paper, several NT passages suggest that this includes the period of the Great Tribulation and even certain judgments beyond the Second Coming event—basically all that would be needed to execute God’s wrath on a sinful world that has rejected Him and to prepare the world for the messianic kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.³⁷

Furthermore, the following context to Heb 10:26-31 points in the direction that the apostates may be in store for a punishment in connection with “the day of the Lord.” In Heb 10:35-36, the author speaks about the time when rewards will be dispensed and about those who endure faithfully so as to receive “the promise.” This is connected with the Second Coming, because in Heb 10:37 he states, “For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay.”³⁸ Although the Second Coming will be good news for most believers, there will be some for whom this will not be so. The Apostle John, for instance, wrote, “And now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming” (1 John 2:28; cf. 4:17).

The reference to the fact that the Lord will not be delayed in His “coming” (Heb 10:37) together with the idea that some who have done the will of God will be rewarded and receive “the promise” (10:35-36) may suggest that the “worse punishment” in store for the apostates is a negative experience at the Judgment Seat of Christ. The coming “day of the Lord” would not only mean the pouring out of the King’s wrath in the Great Tribulation, but also the time when believers have to appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:9-10; Rom 14:10-12).³⁹ The

³⁷ Note especially 1 Thess 5:1-11; 2 Thess 2:2-3; 2 Pet 3:11-13; and Rev 6:16-17.

³⁸ Heb 10:37 is not a strict quotation, but consists of an allusion to Isa 26:20 combined with a slightly reworked quotation from the LXX of Hab 2:3.

³⁹ From my studies in the Book of Revelation, I have concluded that the “Judgment Seat of Christ” takes place *after* the Second Coming rather than after a pretribulational rapture of the church, as some have taught. Notice how at the end of Revelation the Lord declares, “Behold, I am *coming quickly*, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done” (Rev 22:12, italics mine).

In the context of Revelation, the mention of His “coming” must mean the Second Coming that was described in chapter 19. I would also point out that Paul’s statement in 1 Cor 4:5 most naturally implies a time of examination after

emphasis of this event is that the Lord examines each believer for the purpose of determining his or her appropriate reward.

For those who “continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel,” they will be presented before Him “holy and blameless and beyond reproach” (Col 1:22-23). For others not abiding in Him, however, they will shrink back in shame at His coming (1 John 2:28).⁴⁰ The Bible does not present a clear picture of what the implications will be in regard to our “bad deeds,” but it does suggest that there will be some negative consequences.

The promise in John 5:24 that those who believe in Christ will not come into judgment probably means that the Lord will not take our sins into account in regard to determining our eternal destiny. Believers are assured of forgiveness of sins based on the work of Christ on the cross (Col 2:13-14). Nevertheless, all that we have done—“whether good or bad”—will be evident at the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10). Since our sins were forgiven by His blood, this cannot affect our eternal destiny.

However, our sins will obviously be brought up, because Paul declares in 1 Cor 4:5 that the Lord will “both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts.” He goes on to say, “Then each man’s praise will come to him from God.” The evil that we have done will factor in to the praise that the Lord gives us. Sin that others never knew about (things done “in the darkness”) and things done with impure motives will detrimentally affect what praise we receive. Furthermore, our “work” (i.e., our service for Christ) will be examined.

The mention of “the day” in 1 Cor 3:13 seems rather significant to the context of Hebrews 10: “each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work.” Our “work” that survives the fire will be rewarded (3:14). On the other hand, “if any man’s work is

the Second Coming. Those wishing to pursue this further should consult my article, “The ‘Marriage Supper of the Lamb’ in Rev 19:6-10; Implications for the Judgment Seat of Christ,” *Trinity Journal* 26:1 (Spring 2005): 47-68.

⁴⁰ John had defined what he meant by “abiding in Him” in 1 John 2:6: “the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.” Cf. 1 John 2:10, in which he particularly emphasized the matter of loving one’s brother.

burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire” (3:15). On the basis of this verse, a “loss” will be suffered for work that was not approved by the Lord. To some extent then, we will all suffer some loss of praise and loss of reward.

Finally, I would suggest that the topic of a negative experience at the Judgment Seat of Christ should be connected to the issue that the author of Hebrews had already raised earlier in the book, namely, the fear that some might not “enter God’s rest” (Heb 4:1-3). Out of this concern, the author exhorted his readers, “Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience” (Heb 4:11). This, then, is the most likely eschatological judgment that the author envisions them of being in danger of in Heb 10:26-31...failing to enter God’s rest.

If entering God’s Sabbath rest to come involves exercising dominion in the messianic kingdom and ruling with Christ, then the failure to “enter” would be the failure to obtain this as one’s proper inheritance.⁴¹ This would be a punishment worse than temporal death, because it would be an eternal consequence that one could never reverse. The disobedient rebellious Christian who “sins willfully” will be a subject of the kingdom, but he will have forfeited the precious inheritance he could have had.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Book of Hebrews contains a number of “warning passages” inserted sporadically throughout. In the first of these warnings in Heb 2:1-4, the author had mildly reprimanded his readers that they needed to pay much closer attention to what God had revealed through the Son, lest they drift away from it. Each of these warning passages is directed to true regenerate Christians, whom he calls “brethren.” It is not merely the use of this term alone that argues for their identity as believers. As I have demonstrated in this article, both the preceding and following contexts to Heb 10:26-31, as well as the reference to their being *sanctified* by the blood that Christ shed in making the New Covenant, argue for their being regenerate Christians.

⁴¹ This view of God’s “rest” will be further developed and explained in my commentary on Hebrews in the GES *Grace New Testament Commentary* (forthcoming).

With the warning in Heb 10:26-31, the author sounds a more serious note that continual “drifting,” unbelief, and refusal to move on in maturity (concerns that surfaced in chaps 2–6), could eventually lead them to the point of committing a sin that would result in God’s severe punishment. Hence, Heb 10:26 is not addressing the issue of persistence in a lifestyle of sin of a general nature (as some translations imply). Rather, the author uses terminology that echoes what was known as “willful sin” in Numbers 15. His point is that abandonment of their confession in Christ (not holding fast the confession of their hope in His shed blood) is a sin tantamount to committing what had been known as “willful sin” under the Old Covenant. Although they had not gone so far as to actually commit such a treasonous sin yet, they were dangerously close.

Under the Old Covenant, “willful sin” resulted in punishment by physical death, and there was no sacrifice that one could resort to that would deter God’s punishment. For these Hebrew Christians under the New Covenant to decisively abandon their confession of Christ and His blood would (appropriately) demand a *punishment worse than death*. The punishment the author has in mind is not loss of eternal salvation whereby they would go to hell. Rather, it is a punishment linked to “the day of the Lord,” and the immediate context of the passage suggests that it would have something to do with the time of rewards, namely, the Judgment Seat of Christ. Hence, it is a punishment worse than physical death, because it carries eternal consequences.

The more remote context of the book further suggests that the punishment would be the failure to “enter His rest,” a concept first introduced in Hebrews 4, and which probably means that they would jeopardize their inheritance in Messiah’s kingdom (“the world to come”) and be denied the opportunity to reign with Christ. Despite this stern warning, the author goes on to remind them that by not throwing away their confidence (in Christ’s blood), they still have the opportunity to gain a “great reward.” The latter reflects what God truly desires for each believer to receive and which He will be faithful to grant to all those who endure in a faith like unto that immortalized in Hebrews 11.