

THE MASTER'S SEMINARY

HEBREWS: THE EPISTLE OF WARNING UNTO PERSEVERANCE

BY  
KEITH FONG

SUN VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

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## Introduction

The epistle to the Hebrews is one of the most controversial NT epistles; its authorship, provenance, destination, audience, structure, and purpose have been debated from the 1st century.<sup>1</sup> But one thing has universal agreement: it is a book filled with sharp warning, so much that John Owen's one-volume commentary is titled "Hebrews: The Epistle of Warning." The language within the epistle makes this crystal clear: "How will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (Hebrews 2:3); "there is no creature hidden from His sight" (4:13); "it is impossible to renew them again to repentance" (6:5); "How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God...?" (10:29); "See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking" (12:25). Yet, within this rare unity of mind, the difficulty of understand Hebrews' warnings breaks forth. Instead of surveying the different theological perspectives on the warnings as a whole, it is prudent to organize the relevant issues into six distinct questions:

1. Which passages in Hebrews are the warning passages?<sup>2</sup>
2. What are the purposes of these warnings?<sup>3</sup>
3. Who is being warned?
4. What sin is being warned against?
5. What are the consequences of the sin warned against?
6. What is the pastoral exhortation inherent to the warnings?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 762.

<sup>2</sup> This question is made evident by simply comparing different commentaries; there is little agreement.

<sup>3</sup> Questions 2-5 are taken from McKnight's breakthrough article on the warning passages in Hebrews, wherein he takes the warning passages as "an organic whole, each of which expresses four components of the author's message" (Scot McKnight, "The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions," *Trinity Journal* 13, no. 1 (1992): 23.) From this, he identifies four consistent themes. These themes have been rearranged and restated as questions 2-5.

<sup>4</sup> This question is taken from a section of Peterson's article (Robert A Peterson, "Apostasy in the Hebrews Warning Passages," *Presbyterion* 34, no. 1 (2008): 38-42.) which reviews McKnight's article, where he suggests that adding the 'pastoral exhortation' theme would bring addition clarity to the purpose of the warnings.

Because of the limited scope of this essay, the following will be assumed without proof: (1) the epistle to the Hebrews is the unified, cohesive work of one author,<sup>5</sup> (2) the epistle was addressed to Jewish Christians who were under increasing pressure because of their faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah,<sup>6</sup> (3) the warnings of Hebrews do *not* support a non-Calvinist position of the perseverance of the saints.<sup>7</sup> With this groundwork laid, the six questions can be answered to show that the author of Hebrews exhorts the covenant community against the sin of apostasy—a sin that leads to eternal damnation—and towards perseverance in the faith, especially by appealing to the covenant theology of the OT.

### Questions

The questions below will be answered by synthesizing the various warning passages.<sup>8</sup> Most of the comments will focus on Hebrews 6:4-8; this is one of the more controversial passages, and if clarity can be gained on this text, the other texts will likewise be illuminated.

#### Q1. Which passages are the warning passages?

There is little agreement on which passages are the warning passages. The proposed number ranges from three to seven, and even when commentators agree on the number of

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 22–25. See also Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament*, 766.

<sup>6</sup> Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament*, 768–771.

<sup>7</sup> In other words, Hebrews does not contradict the doctrine that true believers cannot ultimately fall away from the Lord (John 10:27-29). Some comments will be made for perseverance of the saints, but a full critique of the non-Calvinist position is beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>8</sup> The answers to Questions 2-5 closely follow McKnight's study of the warning passages in Hebrews, in which he looks at all of the warnings together. While this approach might seem novel, this is best understood as merely looking at the broader context of the entire book. If Hebrews is a single work of a single author to one particular audience (as is probable) this method of synthesizing all of the warning passages is not only justifiable but in fact intended by the author. Of McKnight's article, Peterson says, "Many of his conclusions are irresistible"

passages, they do not on the actual verses of those passages.<sup>9</sup> This essay is will not discuss the merits of which outline of Hebrews is most correct. Instead, Guthrie’s conclusions from his breakthrough text-linguistic analysis of the epistle are adopted without proof. There are five warning passages: 2:1-4, 4:12-13, 6:4-8, 10:26-31, and 12:25-29.<sup>10</sup>

## Q2. What is the purpose of the warnings?

The warning passages are replete with various exhortations, but the primary positive exhortation is to remain faithful to God.<sup>11</sup> Language like “let us hold fast our confession” (4:14), “do not throw away your confidence” (10:35), “you have need of endurance” (10:36), “let us run with perseverance” (12:1) show that the author desires “to propel [the readers] onward toward a life of obedience, courage, and fidelity to God's revelation in Christ.”<sup>12</sup> The warnings function as the “negative side of the exhortation” and aim “to expound the threat of what the consequences would be for the readers...[and] to bring the readers to a change of mind and heart.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> **MacArthur** lists six: 2:1-4, 3:7-14, 5:11-6:20, 10:26-39, 12:15-17, 12: 25-29. John MacArthur Jr., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, electronic ed. (Nashville: Word Publisher, 1997), 1895. **McKnight** lists five, 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:1-29. McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews,” 22. **Lane** lists five: 2:1-4, 3:7-19, 5:11-6:12, 10:19-39, 12:14-20. William L Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), vii–ix. **Bruce** lists four: 2:1-4, 3:7-19, 5:11-14, 10:26-31. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), xii–x. **Gleason** lists five, 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 6:4-12; 10:26-39; 12:25-29). Randall C. Gleason, “The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155, no. 617 (1998): 64. **Mugridge** lists seven, 2:1-4, 3:12-4:2, 4:11-13; 6:4-8; 10:26-31; 12:13b-17, 12:25-29. Alan Mugridge, “Warning in the Epistle to the Hebrews: An Exegetical and Theological Study,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 46, no. 3 (1987): 74. **Mackie** lists three, 2:1-4, 5:11-6:12, 10:26-31. Scott D Mackie, “Early Christian Eschatological Experience in the Warnings and Exhortations of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 53, no. 1 (2012): 95. **Mathewson** lists five, 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:14, 29. Dave Mathewson, “Reading Hebrews 6:4-6 in Light of the Old Testament,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 61, no. 2 (1999): 209.

<sup>10</sup> George H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 73 (Leiden [The Netherlands]; New York: E. J. Brill, 1994), 144. Guthrie’s work is highly recommended and should be considered the definitive answer to all questions regarding the structure of Hebrews.

<sup>11</sup> McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews,” 30–31.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>13</sup> Mugridge, “Warning in the Epistle to the Hebrews: An Exegetical and Theological Study,” 74.

In making these warnings, the author of Hebrews draws upon a deep theological tradition. Each of his warnings are founded upon the exposition of an OT passage, particularly a passage with a *covenantal* context. The first warning in 2:1-4 is given in light of an exposition of 2 Samuel 7, where God gives the *covenant* promise to David, and of Deuteronomy 32, where Moses' song of God's *covenantal* faithfulness to Israel during their wilderness wanderings. The second warning in 4:12-13 comes after an exposition of Psalm 95:7-11, a description of the disobedient generation in the wilderness who broke the *covenant*, first described in Numbers 13-14. The third warning in 6:4-8 interrupts an exposition of Psalm 110:4, which describes the priesthood of Melchizedek, the priesthood which Christ would take up as a priesthood superior to the Aaronic priesthood, as the great high priest of a better *covenant*. The fourth warning in 10:26-31 comes after an exposition of Jeremiah 31:31-34, possibly the greatest OT passage about the new *covenant*. And the fifth warning of 12:25-29 is an integral part to an exposition of Exodus 19-20, when God inaugurated the Mosaic *covenant*.<sup>14</sup> This pattern shows beyond a doubt that the author of Hebrews considers the new covenant community to have inherited the covenantal language and expectations of the old covenant; the "experience of the wilderness generation... is recapitulated in and finds its climax in the situation of the new people of God... The story of the wilderness generation... becomes the story of the new [covenant] community."<sup>15</sup>

This covenantal connection explains the function of the warnings in Hebrews. In the old covenant, God presented the blessings alongside of the curse, the most prominent examples being Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 27-28. The purpose of teaching the blessings and the curse

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<sup>14</sup>References taken from MacArthur Jr., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, 1895. These connections are but a small taste of the exceedingly high number of allusions to the OT in the book of Hebrews.

<sup>15</sup> Mathewson, "Reading Hebrews 6:4-6 in Light of the Old Testament," 213.

is united: to exhort the entire covenant community to trust the Lord God.<sup>16</sup> Thus, it is only appropriate for the author to put forth both the blessing of faithfulness and the curse of apostasy side by side when speaking to those of the new covenant.

### Q3. What sin is being warned against?

The sin warned against is apostasy, that is, the conscious, willful rejection of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, a sin “of such enormity that it has the effect of permanently severing those who are guilty.”<sup>17</sup> Language like “harden[ed] hearts” (3:8), an “evil, unbelieving heart that falls away” (3:12), “fallen away” (6:6), “again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame” (6:6), “turn away from Him” (12:26) makes it clear that the author fears the readers will intentionally, whole-heartedly abandon God and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is not an incidental waning of religious interest, but a sin made against full knowledge of the truth.

Non-Calvinists are typically willing to identify this as the sin of apostasy, but some Calvinists unfortunately deny it. However, the word translated “fallen away” (6:6), παραπεσόντας, makes it clear that apostasy is in view. The word appears here in the NT and nowhere else, and is best taken “not as conditional, but as implication concessive.”<sup>18</sup> This means that despite the spiritual descriptions of verse 4, these people still fall away. It is not a merely imaginary or hypothetical situation, but a real danger.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, if the warnings against apostasy

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<sup>16</sup> Gleason, “The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8,” 66.

<sup>17</sup> Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, “Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Peril of Apostasy,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 35, no. 2 (1973): 145. See also Mugridge, “Warning in the Epistle to the Hebrews: An Exegetical and Theological Study,” 77.

<sup>18</sup> Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 323.

<sup>19</sup> Some Calvinists have argued that since the warnings are directed towards genuine believers, and because believers cannot lose their salvation, that this warning of apostasy is only *hypothetical*. But the “danger of apostasy...is real, not imaginary; otherwise this epistle with its high-sounding admonitions must be dismissed as trifling, worthless, and ridiculous.” (Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand

are merely hypothetical, it makes “the warning pointless.”<sup>20</sup> It is better to follow Owen, the commitment Calvinist, and clearly say, despite the theological difficulties it might cause, that the sin warned against is the “*total* renunciation of... Christianity.”<sup>21</sup>

#### Q4. Who are the warnings given to?

The warnings are given to the entire covenant community, such that *every* member of that community should genuinely fear committing apostasy.<sup>22</sup> This means the author did not specifically single out false believers—those who have a pseudo-faith—with his warnings;<sup>23</sup> it is doubtful that he divides his audience into those whom he thought were saved and those whom he doubted were saved. Instead, it means the author is addressing the *corporate* covenant community, those who had responded to the gospel, to take care lest any one of them *individually* fall away from the living God (3:12). This follows the old covenant precedent,

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Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 206.

It is better to acknowledge that the warnings passages in Hebrew are not intended to address whether a believer can lose his salvation. That being said, it is possible to harmonize Calvinist doctrine with this understanding of the audience; more discussion on this below.

<sup>20</sup> Gleason, “The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8,” 71.

<sup>21</sup> “1. It is not a falling into this or that *actual sin*... 2. It is not a falling upon *temptation*... for this falling away is premediated, and is of deliberation and choice. 3. It is not a falling by a relinquishment or renunciation of some...*principles* of Christian religion... But it is a *total* renunciation of all the constituent principles and doctrines of Christianity.” John Owen, *Hebrews: The Epistle of Warning* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1953), 98. Emphasis original.

<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, some Calvinists have creative ways to avoid applying the warnings to believers. For example, Verbrugge argues that the book of Hebrews is concerned only with the covenant community’s apostasy and not with individual apostasy. (Verlyn D. Verbrugge, “Towards a New Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-6,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 15 (April 1980): 61–73. Cited in Peterson, “Apostasy in the Hebrews Warning Passages,” 29.) However, this ignores the clear focus that Hebrews brings to the individual (3:12-13, 4:1; 4:11; 12:14-16).

<sup>23</sup> McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews,” 40. McKnight argues that the warnings were given to phenomenological-true believers—those who have all the evidences of having genuine faith (24). But instead of understanding that within this category there are both those who are truly saved and those who only appear to be saved, he collapses the two and argues that those who are genuinely saved may indeed apostatize (46-48). The “entire covenant community” perspective covers the same group of people (i.e. professing believers) without adopting his conclusion that genuine believers can apostatize.



wherein curses came “both corporately and individually. ... [for example] Deuteronomy 28 will be enacted against the covenant *community* as a whole should it defect from Torah corporately. Yet...high-handed sin against the stipulations of covenant will result in removal [of the individual] from the covenant community” as well.<sup>24</sup>

Focusing on 6:4-8 clearly shows that individuals who are genuinely part of covenant community are in view. Verse 4 and 5 stipulate four separate characteristics: (1) once been enlightened, (2) tasted of the heavenly gift, (3) partakers of the Holy Spirit, (4) have tasted of the good word of God and the powers of the age to come.<sup>25</sup> To take these as descriptions as incomplete experiences of the blessings of the Christian community, as if they describe “almost Christians,” misses the mark.<sup>26</sup> These descriptions not given to evaluate the genuineness (or falseness) of individual’s faith, but to describe the genuineness of their involvement in the blessings of the covenant community; in every way, they looked and played the part. In fact, there is no reason to doubt the genuineness of their faith except for one thing: they apostatize.

This ‘covenant community’ perspective accounts for several key truths that are often absent from the discussion:<sup>27</sup> (1) *only* the Lord knows who are His with perfect assurance (2 Tim 2:19) and thus men do not, (2) those who appear *to men’s eyes* to have genuine faith can actually

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<sup>24</sup> Matthew McAfee, “Covenant and the Warnings of Hebrews: The Blessing and the Curse,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57, no. 3 (2014): 541n19.

<sup>25</sup> Gleason, “The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8,” 75–78. See also Hughes, “Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Peril of Apostasy,” 138–143. For an explanation of the OT underpinnings to “good word” (6:5), see McAfee, “Covenant and the Warnings of Hebrews: The Blessing and the Curse,” 538–544.

<sup>26</sup> See Roger Nicole, “Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints,” in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. G. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 355–64. For a non-Calvinist critique of Nicole’s position, see McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews,” 49–53.

<sup>27</sup> This view can coincide well with the Calvinistic view, that if a confessing Christian falls away, it reveals his faith was not genuine and that God will ultimately keep a believer with true faith from apostatizing. For an extended defense, see Hughes, “Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Peril of Apostasy.”

be unregenerate (i.e. Judas, Demas, Simon Magus),<sup>28</sup> (3) a critical mark of genuine faith is perseverance in Christ unto death (Rom 2:7, Rev 13:10), (4) all Christians must be exhorted to persevere if they are to endure to the end. McCaffee summarizes the answers to question 3 and question 4 well:

the subjects of these warning passages...have experienced full membership in the life of the new covenant community, but they have exhibited a certain hardness of heart characteristic of their forbears in the wilderness wanderings. Indeed, these warnings are intended to dissuade them from their hardened ways in order to bring them to repentance, but their spiritual destruction via apostasy looms ever so near as a real and present danger.<sup>29</sup>

#### Q5. What are the consequences of that sin?

The consequence of apostasy is “eternal damnation.”<sup>30</sup> Language like “How will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? [Implied answer: we won’t!]” (2:2), “they were not able to enter because of unbelief” (3:19), “It is impossible to renew them again to repentance” (6:6), “it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned (6:8), there is “a terrifying expectation of judgment” (10:26-27), there is “much severer punishment [for the one] ...who has trampled under foot the Son of God” (10:29), “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:31) is direct and forceful. While some would argue that the consequence of apostasy is nothing so harsh, and instead that it is a temporary removal from fellowship, or a chastening,<sup>31</sup> or the fatherly discipline, or a loss of millennial reward,<sup>32</sup> each of

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<sup>28</sup> Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 217–218.

<sup>29</sup> McCaffee, “Covenant and the Warnings of Hebrews: The Blessing and the Curse,” 551.

<sup>30</sup> McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews,” 33–36.

<sup>31</sup> See Gleason, “The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8,” 86–88.

<sup>32</sup> Oberholtzer says that “failure to press on to maturity might result in temporal discipline. It seems reasonable from Hebrews 3:1- 4:13 that this might sometimes include the loss of physical life (cf. 1 Cor. 11:30; 1 John 5:16-17). Theologically it is clear that present unfaithfulness will result in loss of reward at the judgment seat of Christ. The result for the believer is not loss of eternal salvation but a forfeiting of inheritance-rest, reward, and position in the coming millennial kingdom.” Thomas Kern Oberholtzer, “The Thorn-Infested Ground in Hebrews

whom will despite his hardened heart be saved in the end, downgrades the consequence of the sin of apostasy and defangs the entire force of the warnings.

On the contrary, the author says that it is “impossible to renew \[apostates] to repentance” (6:6) and that they are like fruitless ground, “worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned” (6:8). The sin of apostasy is irreversible. It is not just “practically speaking” impossible,<sup>33</sup> or merely impossible *for men* to bring the apostate back,<sup>34</sup> but truly impossible for this person to be saved. For “once Christ and His sacrifice have been rejected, there is nowhere else to turn”<sup>35</sup> for salvation. Apostasy, the “willful rejection of God under conditions of full exposure to the light,”<sup>36</sup> is the gravest of sins, with the gravest of consequences.

To view the consequence of apostasy as anything but final judgment unjustifiably severs the warnings from their old covenant context. The movement of Hebrews is from the lesser to the greater (2:2-3, 10:29, 12:25), from the old covenant to the new covenant. Therefore, the consequences of apostasy in the new covenant are not lesser than the consequences under the old covenant, but greater.<sup>37</sup> Under the old covenant, the consequence for unbelief and abandoning the Lord was physical death and terrible physical curses (Deut 28); there was no recourse for

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6:4-12,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145, no. 579 (1988): 326.

<sup>33</sup> See Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 144.

<sup>34</sup> “The use of the active voice limits the strict application of the words to human agency.” Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 150. This makes too much of the active voice, as if God’s agency were only expressed in passive voice verbs!

<sup>35</sup> Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 323. See also Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 1:142.

<sup>36</sup> Nicole, “Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints,” 363. Quoted in Peterson, “Apostasy in the Hebrews Warning Passages,” 31.

<sup>37</sup> Gleason, “The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8,” 90. Strangely, Gleason admits this, but then calls the “severe devastation and physical suffering foreseen by the author as coming on the inhabitants of Judea and Jerusalem... during the Roman invasion of Palestine and Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem” (90). This presumes that the audience was in Jerusalem, and that the destruction of Jerusalem was worse than the Babylonian and Assyrian destruction of Judea, both of which are highly dubious.

readmittance.<sup>38</sup> If one apostatizes under the new covenant, the consequence is eternal death: “For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven” (Heb 12:25).

#### Q6. What is the pastoral encouragement?<sup>39</sup>

The pastoral encouragement comes in 6:9-12 and 10:32-39, in which the author fundamentally says, “I am confident of your faith.” The encouragement in 6:9, “beloved, we are convinced of better things [than apostasy] concerning you,” is followed by recounting the *evidence* of their genuine faith, namely the work and love towards His name (6:10), and then an expressed desire that they would “through faith and patience inherit the promises” (6:12). These works are the fruits of genuine faith (Eph 2:10). It is noteworthy that the author follows one of the sternest warnings passages with the only instance of “beloved” (6:9) in the epistle.<sup>40</sup> He is “speaking in this way,” with tough warnings, out of love. In 6:11-12, he makes plain the purpose of his warnings and exhortations: “...we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end.” Nothing less than perseverance *until the end* is desired.

This positive intention behind the warnings is clearly seen in the context of 6:4-6. In 4:14-16, the author opens his discourse on Christ as the great high priest. In 5:1-6, he begins to discuss the Melchizedekian priesthood of Christ from Psalm 110. In 6:7-10 he begins to describe

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<sup>38</sup> “Unlike all other types of sin committed, no sacrifice was provisioned for the high-handed sin.” McAfee, “Covenant and the Warnings of Hebrews: The Blessing and the Curse,” 545.

<sup>39</sup> This question comes from Peterson, “Apostasy in the Hebrews Warning Passages.” He reviews McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews.” and suggests that including this missing question may “allow Calvinist interpreters to harmonize the warnings with their soteriology” (42).

<sup>40</sup> Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 329.

the high priestly activity of Christ, but then in 6:11, he abruptly deviates from instruction to rebuke, confronting the laziness and immaturity of the covenant community. The purpose of this rebuke is made evident in 6:1-3—the author desires his readers to leave immaturity behind and “press on” (6:1) to maturity. The warning of 6:4-8 amplifies this warning, pushing the readers to consider the eventual destination of their immaturity: apostasy. Their spiritual lethargy leaves them in great danger to apostasy. In 6:9, the author then flips the coin from warning to encouragement. The warning does not exist only to discourage apathy, but to arouse faithfulness.

In a similar way, the pastoral encouragement in 10:39, “we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul,” is intended to propel the community to faithfulness. This encouragement is preceded by looking backward by presenting a litany of evidence of their genuine faith (10:32-34), and then by looking forward, to endure that they may receive “what was promised” (10:36). This takes up the pastoral duty of reminder (2 Pet 1:13, 3:1), not only of the Lord’s goodness to them, but even their past response to His goodness. Again, the pastoral encouragement is one of confidence in their perseverance, one that even binds the author’s own perseverance with that of his audience (“we”, 10:39).

As a father warns his son of the consequences of disobedience *because the father desires the son’s obedience*, so, too, the author of Hebrews warns the covenant community that they might remain faithful to the Lord.<sup>41</sup> The author has a pastoral heart that understands most of the flock as believers, and yet he may also be unsure of a minority.<sup>42</sup> Thus, pastoral love drives him to both warn the entire flock of unbelief, and encourage them all to perseverance in Jesus, to

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<sup>41</sup> This interweaving of warning and encouragement, given to the entire covenant community, is inherent to the old covenant. For an excellent treatment of this matter in Heb 6:4-6, see Mathewson, “Reading Hebrews 6:4-6 in Light of the Old Testament.”

<sup>42</sup> Peterson, “Apostasy in the Hebrews Warning Passages,” 43–44. While it is plausible that some had already apostatized, this is difficult to prove conclusively from the text alone.

continue to trust in the one greater than Moses, than Levi, than all.

### **Conclusion**

The warnings of the book of Hebrews were written to the entire church community, warning them against the sin of apostasy and its irreversible consequences of condemnation and eternal damnation. The author uses warning deftly to stand against the tide of faithlessness and cowardice in his congregation and protest the devastating sin of abandoning Jesus Christ. But the warnings do not exist merely to convince the Hebrews to stop in their progression towards faithlessness, but to turn them around and exhort them to “run with endurance the race... fixing [their] eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith” (12:1-2). Ultimately, the author is confident of his congregation’s faith in the Lord Jesus, the supreme and better high priest of a better covenant—confident that they will be willing even to shed blood in their fidelity to the Lord Jesus Christ (12:4). The warnings of Hebrews are a wakeup call to those who profess to believe in the perseverance of the saints, for while the doctrine is true, there is “not place for a doctrine of assurance which enables us to relax our grip by faith on our heavenly hope achieved for us by Christ.”<sup>43</sup> For that reason, the epistle to the Hebrews, this epistle of warning, may be exactly what the lethargic modern-day evangelical church needs.

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<sup>43</sup> Mugridge, “Warning in the Epistle to the Hebrews: An Exegetical and Theological Study,” 81.

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