

Chapter 5

THE HEBREWS PARADOX

- *An apparent contradiction*

Certain passages in the New Testament have (quite understandably) caused some believers great anxiety when it comes to the issue of eternal security. Several of these are found scattered through the book of Hebrews – and we need to gain a clear insight into their true significance.

While Paul assures us in his letters to the Roman (and Galatian) churches, that salvation is purely on the basis of grace and obtained by *faith* alone, several verses in the book of *Hebrews* seem to suggest something quite different!

THE PROBLEM VERSES

- *Hebrews chapters two and three*

The first of these ‘problem’ verses takes the form of a question. The writer asks his readers:

“How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation...?” (*Hebrews 2:3*) (KJV)

At first glance, it *does* sound like there’s a heavy price to pay if we ‘mess up’ in our lives, fail to live up to our potential as believers, or simply stop believing!

Several other shorter passages in the third chapter seem to bear this out:

“We have come to share in Christ *if indeed we hold our original conviction* firmly to the very end..... if you hear his voice, do not harden our hearts....” (*Hebrews 3:14-15*) (italics mine)

- *Hebrews six: a falling away*

Now we move on to where it gets even worse! Here the writer says:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.” (*Hebrews 6:4-6*)

Sounds ominous! And clearly these must have been ‘believers’, mustn’t they? After all, they had been *enlightened* and *shared in the Holy Spirit*. And evidently they must have repented at one

time - a repentance they apparently couldn't repeat if they fell away!

How much clearer does a passage need to be? Surely the doctrine of '*once saved -always saved*' gets torpedoed right here!

- *Hebrews six: a falling away*

And finally, what about that ominous passage in the tenth chapter?

"If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?" (*Hebrews 10:26-29*)

Deliberately sinning after receiving the knowledge of the truth? It sounds as if, for such a person, there's only judgment to look forward to! Even if we're 'sanctified', there's 'no more sacrifice for sins' and we're eternally lost.

- *The analogy of faith: context is everything!*

Of course, if these passages 'prove' that -we can lose our salvation' then they prove too much because they would patently contradict what is clearly taught elsewhere in Scripture! Especially the teaching we've already discussed in reference to exchanging Adam's headship with that of Christ's and the fundamental truth of being *in Christ* as opposed to being *in Adam*.

And this presents us with a real paradox. While we may differ in our interpretations of certain passages - and while these interpretations may be sometimes wildly contradictory - one thing we *must* agree on is that the Bible *cannot contradict itself*. In fact, this widely accepted assumption has led to a principle of *hermeneutics* (or *interpretation*) called "*the analogy of faith*" which states the following:

"No scripture can be taken in such a way as to render it in conflict with what is clearly taught elsewhere in Scripture."

And how do we ensure that we're interpreting a specific passage correctly? The answer is a relatively simple one!

Remember the three golden rules of real estate? *Location, location, location!* Well, the three underlying principles for correct interpretation of any Bible passage are as follows: *Context! Context! Context!*

If we don't take the context of each passage into consideration, then we're likely to find enough material in any given book of the Bible to apparently fuel a storm of false cults and various heresies.

A handy little rhyme I was introduced to some time ago, goes like this:

If in this book you choose to look,

Five things observe with care:

Of whom it speaks,

To whom it speaks,

Why when and where.

A closer examination of the book of *Hebrews* will make clear that our problems with its interpretation arise when we take both the book itself - and sections within the book - out of their proper context. *Understand* the context and the problems in these passages will vanish like a mist in the clear daylight of the New Testament revelation.

- *The intended audience: a 'mixed bag'*

The primary mistake one can make in the interpretation of this letter is to assume that just one *homogenous* group is being addressed by the writer. This leads to the assumption that every statement - every word - is applicable to this same group of people.

Consequently, if one passage clearly addresses true believers and another passage warns of eternal damnation - then of course the inference is naturally drawn that a true believer is still in danger of losing his or her salvation.

But this *a priori* assumption is not supported by the evidence! It's clear from the onset that the intended recipients of this letter were *not*, as with Paul's epistles, a specific church (or group of churches) throughout the Mediterranean. They were, as indicated by the title of this letter, Jews who, as the text makes clear, may potentially have fallen into one of three categories:

1. Those who had *embraced* Christianity and become an integral part of the Church.
2. Those who were contemplating doing so.
3. Those who, for whatever reason, had become disaffected and were thinking about returning to Judaism.

The latter two groups may well have become true believers who *did* go on to faith in Christ, so the writer qualifies his severe warnings against the sin of unbelief with the words:

“Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case – the things that have to do with salvation.”

And again, in *Hebrews 10:39*, he says:

“But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.”

So much is clear, but because there was always a *possibility* that such waverers (or even potential apostates) existed among the true believers, the writer warns of the dangers of holding such attitudes. Warnings against the sin of ultimate unbelief and rejection of the true Messiah are therefore interspersed throughout the book of *Hebrews* and must *not* be confused with the many sections devoted to true believers.

And that's really the key to understanding this epistle!

Because at different points in the letter, the writer has *one group or the other* in mind - but *not all at the same time!* On the one hand, he addresses the confirmed Jewish saints with words of praise, encouragement and support. On the other, for those who *may be* currently wavering on the brink of commitment, he has both encouragement and stern warnings about the consequences of not following through in their faith.

- *A persecuted Church'*

And history teaches us that these Jews really *did* need encouragement and support! We know that at the time of the writing of this letter to the Hebrews, persecution had broken out against the Church. Not against Judaism, mind you, because the Jewish religion had long been tolerated - even accepted - by Rome, but against this new, threatening movement known as "*The Way*"!

Anxious to control its subject population, and inflamed by the Jewish leadership, Rome had initiated a spate of persecution against the followers of the new so-called *religion* - one that refused to acknowledge any but the one, true God.

- *The purpose of this letter*

Given the intended audience, and for the sake of both Jewish believers and the as-yet uncommitted, it was entirely appropriate for the writer to clearly demonstrate the superiority of the new way over the old - the New Testament revelation of Christ over the foundational teachings of Judaism portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures we know as the *Old Testament*.

In doing so, he is not only more firmly establishing confirmed Jewish believers but also expressing his concern for the particular group of Jews who may have also been the recipients of his letter. It seems reasonable to suppose that these would have initially left the temple sacrifices, identified themselves with the visible church, and made a profession of Jesus as Messiah and High Priest - without going on to true faith in Christ. Now, in the face of intense persecution, these same individuals would have been in danger of renouncing Christ and returning to the temple sacrifices - *apostatizing* if you will!

This point is crucial to our understanding of this Hebrew epistle!

INTERPRETING CHAPTERS TWO AND THREE

- *Ignoring the message*

But to understand the context of these 'problem passages, we must begin our investigation in the second chapter of this enigmatic epistle where the writer issues the first of several warnings:

Our first so-called '*problem*' text is.

“We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.” (*Hebrews 2:1*) (italics mine)

Notice here that the problem addressed is not one of morality or lifestyle in any form, but one of treating New Testament *truth* lightly or carelessly - not attaching sufficient importance to this new revelation and letting it slip away. Certainly,, a timely warning for those Jews who had recently left Judaism and were hovering on the brink of faith in Christ.

This warning against inattention is reinforced immediately afterwards when the writer adds:

“..how shall we escape if we *ignore* so great a salvation?” (*Hebrews 2:3a*) (italics mine)

The writer is clearly not referring to any wavering of one's faith or failure to persist in the Christian walk: he's warning of *inattention to what has been heard!* A failure to 'take on board' the whole truth of the gospel in the first place. This is clearly seen by what he goes on to say:

“This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.” (*Hebrews 2:3b*)

This does suggest that if this sceptical or dismissive mind-set *should* apply to any of the writer's audience, then such Jews would be in real danger of allowing the current persecution to harden them to what they had been on the point of accepting. And this would lead them on to

disobediently renounce their professed faith in the new Messiah and consequently come under God's judgment!

- *Rebellion and Disobedience: the problem of unbelief*

The same sin is addressed in the next chapter! This time, using the Israelites downfall in the wilderness as an illustration, the writer expresses this rejection of revealed truth in stronger terms: not merely as inattention to what has been presented, but as a *hardening of the heart* and *rebellion* - the very things that had proven to be their ancestors' undoing, so long ago:

"..do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the wilderness," (Hebrews 3:8)

These Jews were certainly being tested right there and then - just as their forefathers had been in the wilderness. At that time, the Israelites had reached Kadesh Barnea but had turned back when they saw what lay ahead of them - despite Joshua and Caleb's urging. The result was that they were condemned to forty years of aimless wandering and ultimate death in the wilderness! (But notice that they didn't lose what they had. They had, in fact, stopped short of getting it in the first place!)

And what was the problem? Not lifestyle, not wrong-doing - but *unbelief!*

"So, we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief." (Hebrews 3:19)

- *The nature of apostasy*

The warning against this danger has already been sounded out earlier in the letter:

"See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God." (Hebrews 3:12)

This verse sounds threateningly ominous unless we understand two things:

1. The expression *"a sinful, unbelieving heart"* (is not an entirely accurate translation of the original Greek and is susceptible to misinterpretation. The phrase is what is known as a 'genitive of reference' (*kardía ponēra apistias*) and is literally translated, *"a heart sinful with reference to unbelief."* That makes all the difference to our understanding of what the writer is trying to say.

The heart is not sinful and therefore unbelieving. *Unbelief itself is the sin!*

So, what have these verses to do with a Christian losing his or her salvation? Nothing whatsoever!

We must clearly understand this one crucial point: the sin described and warned against in this letter to the Hebrews is the *sin of apostasy* - of unbelief and renunciation of *professed belief*.

2. The verb ‘turn away’ is a translation of the Greek word *aphistemi*. It not only means: ‘to flee from’, ‘shun’, ‘desert’, but can also mean, ‘to stand aloof from’. It’s the word from which we derive our English word *apostasy* - which describes the act of someone who has previously subscribed to a certain belief but has now renounced this former professed belief in favor of some other which is diametrically opposite. At every point it negates his former belief!

Can this sin be committed by a person genuinely born again? Surely the answer speaks for itself! But could it describe an unsaved Jew who was in danger of turning back to Judaism? Absolutely! Turning back to Judaism would negate all New Testament teaching and deny that Christ was the true Messiah!

And indeed, the fact that the writer is addressing potentially unsaved Jews is borne out further in chapter four. Here we find that the *true believer*, far from falling short, has *already* entered the promised land which is the endpoint of faith:

“Now we who have believed enter that rest.” (*Hebrews 4:3*)

(Notice incidentally, that the rest is for those who *believe*; it’s a rest of *faith* - not relying on *works* for salvation. As such, it’s the present and guaranteed possession of every believer in Christ (*John 3:18; Romans 8:16; 1 John 3:14, 5:13*))

But the writer is concerned that some of his readers may not have entered that rest.

“Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful (or ‘let us fear’) that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.” (*Hebrews 4:1*) (italics mine) (brackets mine)

Falling short of the promised land; turning back at Kadesh Barnea, on the very borders of the land - afraid of what might lie ahead! And the problem? The sin to be avoided at all costs? It’s described again in the next verse:

“For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they [your fathers] did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed.” (*Hebrews 4:2*) (italics mine) (brackets mine)

And this is the burden of the writer to the Hebrews. *Lack of faith* was the problem with certain of these professed believers as it had been with the nation in the wilderness. So he concludes this section of the epistle with this admonition in the fourth chapter:

“Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.” (*Hebrews 4:11*) (italics mine)

INTERPRETING CHAPTER SIX: LEAVING THE FIRST PRINCIPLES

- *Leaving the first principle*

Now when we come to chapter 6 of this epistle, we find that the *same sin* is warned against – but now the writer gives more detail. He describes this sin in terms of deserting the Messiah, abandoning the faith and reverting to the Judaism of the Old Testament (later described as a ‘falling away’)

Notice what the writer first urges them to do

“Therefore, let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ.” (*Hebrews 6:1:*)

A literal translation of the Greek in this sentence would be the Greek literally says is this:

‘Therefore leaving the teaching of the beginning (first principles) of Christ’

The Greek verb used here (‘move beyond’, ‘leave’) is the word *aphiemi* and its best understood in this context as meaning: ‘to lay aside’, ‘leave’, ‘forsake’. And what they were to leave behind was ‘the teaching of the beginning of Christ’,.

This expression can only be a reference refer to Old Testament teaching, which does indeed contain all the initial teaching about the Messiah (*Luke 24:27; John 5:39*)

But the Old Testament revelation was the shadow; Christ *himself* was the substance. The Messiah who had come to his own, to seek and to save the lost and to build his church! So going back into Judaism should not be an option for these Jews. As John said:

“.....the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.” (*1 John 2:5*)

The writer then continues by encouraging these Jews to be “taken forward to maturity” and here the word ‘maturity (or ‘completeness’) is the Greek word *teleiôtēs* - derived from the same Greek word-stem as the word ‘translated as *culmination*’ Paul’s letter to the Romans:

“Christ is the culmination (*telos*: ‘goal’; ‘endpoint’) of the law (Old Testament teachings) so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.” (*Romans 10:4*) (brackets mine)

The natural reading of this passage, therefore, makes it clear that the writer is addressing a group of Jews who may not yet have come to full faith in Christ – and were perhaps still clinging to the initial teachings of Judaism. He’s urging them to abandon the rituals once for all and make the transition from Judaism to Christ. Because *Christ* is the goal (endpoint) of all that is conveyed in the Hebrew Scriptures. The teachings of Judaism pointed to *him* as their fulfilment.

- *Teachings to move beyond*

And now the writer gives examples of the foundational teachings they were not to lay again but to move beyond. These include:

1. *“repentancee from acts that lead to death and of faith in God.” (Hebrews 6:1)*

‘..acts that lead to death’ could well be a reference to the basic thrust of Judaism: justification by self- effort (as we clearly see in *Romans 9 verses 30-32*).

But what about “faith in God”? Why move beyond that? Does that make any sense?

Well, it does when you realize that the expression is a general one describing the nature of Israel’s relationship with Yahweh of the Old Testament. The opening verses of Hebrews make it verses clear that God has no longer confined Himself to the ‘shadow’ teaching of Judaism: He is no longer to be thought of in general terms but as One who has revealed Himself in the Person of Christ!

“In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.....” (Hebrews.1:1-2)

And that's just the point - these Hebrew seekers were to move beyond a general acknowledgement of God (as we see in Judaism) to a specific faith in, and relationship with Christ the Son.

Paul makes this very point when he says said to the elders in Ephesus:

“I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.” (Acts 20:21) (italics mine)

2. *“instruction about cleansing rites” (Hebrews 1:2)*

This is a clear reference to the *washings* or *ablutions* of Judaism: ‘types’ and ‘shadows’ which were to find their spiritual fulfilment in the cleansing work of Christ brought about by the Holy Spirit.

“He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” (Titus 3:5)

3. *“The laying on of hands. “*

This is also self-explanatory. It's describes the ritual *laying on of hands* that was a feature of the sacrificial offerings – detailed in Leviticus 1-7

4 *“the resurrection of the dead”*

At first sight, this appears to be a perfectly respectable component of New Testament teaching and so why should it be abandoned. But notice that the expression doesn't recognize any distinction between the resurrection of the *just* and that of the *unjust*. In other words, it represents a prior understanding of a *general resurrection* rather than the *first* and *second* resurrections revealed in the New Testament Scriptures.

It's in the New Testament that we are given a more fully-developed understanding of the *out-resurrection from among the dead* initiated by the resurrection of the Messiah himself – “the first-fruits of them that have fallen asleep.” (1 *Corinthians 15:20* see also *Romans 6:5*)

The saved are raised first - separated from the lost! In this sense it is an *out-resurrection from among the dead* – a blessing experienced only by believers, as Paul refers to in

“and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.” (*Philippians 3:11*)

This resurrection begins with the ‘rapture’ of the Church and is then followed by that of the saints beheaded in the ‘great tribulation’. John tells us that these martyrs “came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (*Revelation 20:4*). He then describes this event as the ‘first’ resurrection (*Revelation 20:5*) and goes on to say:

“Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) (*Revelation 20:6*).

5. *Eternal judgment*

The final truth they were to move beyond was that of *eternal judgement*. The reason for this seems even less clear until we understand that the understanding of judgment expounded in the Old Testament Scriptures has been superseded by the 'no-judgment' or *justification* of the believer in Christ!

It certainly does appear then that the dangers warned against are those relating to *Jews* and *Judaism*. In fact, the purpose of the writer - and the targeted audience of these instructions – seem to be self-evident!

INTERPRETING CHAPTER SIX: THE FALLING AWAY

Now we come to a very familiar passage in chapter six – one that has really caused a lot of consternation among sincere children of God. This is despite the fact that it contains expressions that appear nowhere else in the New Testament and which can only be reasonably interpreted in the context of Judaism versus Christianity.

Let's read this so-called *problem* passage:

“It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their

loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.”
(*Hebrews 6:4-6*)

This certainly sounds ominous! And it would be if these ‘enlightened’ individuals were ‘born-again’ believers. But it does ‘beg the question’: are those described in this passage saved and therefore in danger of losing their salvation? The verses immediately preceding this passage would, as we’ve just discussed, certainly suggest otherwise. But is such a conclusion borne out by the passage itself?

- *The work of the Holy Spirit*

The writer begins:

“It is impossible for *those who have once been enlightened*,” (v.4) (*emphasis mine*)

The writer is declaring in no uncertain terms that the objects of this particular warning had had their eyes opened to the truth: they had been ‘*once for all*’ (Greek hapax) enlightened - this ‘enlightenment’ could only occur as a result of the Holy Spirit’s work. They now clearly understood the issues involved: how the ‘type’ had been set aside for the ‘reality’ - the ‘shadow’ for the ‘substance’ - the Old Testament for the New. And that Christ was the true Messiah - their one and only spiritual High Priest.

The writer goes on to describe this group of people as those who: *have tasted the heavenly gift*

The word ‘tasted’ (*gustomai*) - means just that. They had been given a distinct impression of the character and quality of this new life in Christ the Messiah: the reality of this fellowship and communion in the Body of Christ. Like the spies at Kadesh Barnea, they saw the land: they had its very fruit in their hands.

And in this same situation, what did their fathers do? They turned back - on the very threshold of the land of promise! And why? As we saw earlier: *because of unbelief* - the very sin these current Jews were in danger of committing!

But surely this group was different! Surely they must have saved! After all, they are then described as having: “*shared in the Holy Spirit.*”

This expression literally means that *they had been made partakers of the Holy Spirit.*

For many - this clinches it! These must therefore have been believers who were in danger of losing their salvation!

But the neither the context nor the text itself support this interpretation.

The context shows clearly that the 'land' lay before these Jews – its fruit was in their hands; *but they hadn't yet entered!* The passage right up to this point bears this out very clearly.

So, in what sense were they made *partakers of the Holy Spirit* - if they weren't yet saved?

The answer is a simple one – the word 'partakers' does not mean 'possessors'. It doesn't suggest that the Holy Spirit was *indwelling* this group of Jews.

The Greek word used here is *metachos* - and, according to the Greek scholar, Kenneth Wuest, it's used to describe *someone who cooperates or partners another in an undertaking or enterprise*

Consider the use of this word in a couple of other NT passages:

"So they signaled their partners (metachoi) in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink." (Luke 5:7) (brackets mine)

And again, in the first chapter of this Hebrews epistle

"..... God, has set you above your companions (metachoi) by anointing you with the oil of joy." (Hebrews 1:9) (brackets mine)

The writer observes that *up to this point* these wavering Jews would have cooperated with the Holy Spirit (*partners in the same enterprise – in the same undertaking*). The enterprise (or undertaking) of the Spirit, as we know, is to lead the unbeliever (step by step) toward the act of faith. This is described in *1 Pet 1:2* as the *"sanctifying work of the Spirit"* which leads a person to be *"obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood."* (*Hebrews 1:9*).

And the Spirit had done just that with these Jews! They had co-operated (been partners) with the Spirit in this work which was so thoroughly done that it *never needed repeating*. They were, as previously described, *"once and for all enlightened"*. The next step, *the step of faith*, was up to them alone and the terrible danger was that of reneging on Christ and turning back to Judaism.

There was simply no excuse for these Jews. They had *"tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age."* (v.5). These powers (miracles) clearly showed that the New Testament revelation was of God and they should have been convinced by this!

But if, given all these advantages (*full enlightenment* which could not be repeated or added to and consistent exposure to the Word of God and its effects), they must be very careful not to *fall away*. This expression is a translation of the Greek word: *parapipto* (used here for the only time in the N.T.). It means: *to fall beside a person or thing; to slip aside; hence: to deviate from the right path; to turn aside*

In other words, they should be careful not to turn their backs on what they professed of the New Testament and deny Christ as their true Messiah!

This is the essence of apostasy, and once committed, it becomes *impossible* for the offenders to be: “brought back to repentance.” (v6)

This should instantly set warning bells ringing in the minds of those who consider these Jews to be true believers. An inability to repent could not apply to a child of God as it would immediately fly in the face of John’s reassuring statement that,

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 5:9)

But, of course, the word *repentance*, as it’s used here, has nothing to do with the act saving faith *per se*. The word is *metanoia* which literally means: *a change of mind* - exactly the meaning of its English equivalent: *repent (to’ think again’)*.

Remember in, when Esau desperately tried to change Isaac's mind with respect to the inheritance? The verse literally translated reads that: “he did not find a place of repentance though he sought for it carefully with tears.” (Hebrew .12:17)

In other words, he couldn't change Isaac's mind - no matter how hard he tried!

Similarly, given their advantages (together with their complete enlightenment), if these Jews should turn away at this point, what possible combination of future circumstances could cause them to repent - to change their minds? Their spiritual condition - the hardening of their hearts - would make this an impossibility!

Why? Because, As the writer goes on to say:

“To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again” (v.6)

Literally this verse means:

“They are crucifying again the Son of God for (or in respect of) themselves.”

These Jews would be taking sides again - once again identifying with the nation that had Christ crucified. They would be virtually confirming the judgment of their peers - that Jesus wasn't the true Messiah after all; instead he was a deceiver - worthy of death!

As well as this, the writer adds, they would be “subjecting him to public disgrace.”

H.A Ironside records that the Jews had a terrible way of taking such an individual back. They would take him to an unclean place where he would kill a sow. Then, to illustrate his denial, the apostasizing Jew would spit on the blood of the sow and say:

“So count I the blood of Jesus the Nazarene.”

The Jews would then purify him and receive him back as one of their own.

Very obviously this process would harden the apostate’s heart to such an extent that it would be rendered impervious to any further ministry of the Holy Spirit. All hope for such a betrayer of the Messiah would be gone!

It should be clear that this sin cannot be committed today. There is currently no temple in Jerusalem, no sacrifices to leave and to return to, no attesting miracles being performed, and, except in the case of the Jew, no question as to the closing of the Old Dispensation and the opening of the New.

This sin involved the relative merits of the Old and New Testaments. It involved an abandonment of Christian reality and a return to the types and rituals of Judaism. It involved a rejection of Christ as the Messiah and a relegating of him once again to the cross as far as the individual was concerned!

This sin then simply not the same as the rejection of Christ by a sinner today. And it's certainly not a sin that can be committed by a *believer*; it simply has no relevance to us!

But the writer wants to believe the best of *all* his readers and so he goes on to say:

“Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case---the things that have to do with salvation.” (Hebrews 6:9)

INTERPRETING CHAPTER TEN: THE WILFUL SIN

And now we come to the second so-called *problem* passage. It's found in the tenth chapter of *Hebrews* where this same rejection of the Messiah is described as the sin of *wilful (deliberate) unbelief*. The writer begins:

“If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.” (Hebrews 10:26-27)

This passage has left many Christians shaking in their boots! But if this verse proves you can *lose your salvation*, then it proves too much! After all, how many of you have *not* committed a single deliberate, wilful sin during this past week? So, we're all lost - right?

Given the Scriptural teaching of the substitutionary work of Christ, justification by faith and our subsequent identity in Christ, such a position is self-evident nonsense, of course! It contravenes the whole tenor of Scripture and thoroughly violates the *analogy of faith* that we discussed at the beginning of this message. But that being so, what is this passage in **Hebrews 10** actually talking about?

- *A recurring theme*

The answer is a simple one: it's a further warning against the *same sin* spoken about in chapters two, three, four and six of this epistle.

In chapter two it's a *neglect and careless treatment of revealed truth* - allowing the New Testament revelation to *slip by*. In chapters three and four the sin is described as a *hardening of the heart* because of *unbelief*, and in chapter six it's a *falling away from revealed truth* and a *return to Judaism*.

And now here in chapter ten, this same sin of unbelief is described as the *wilful rejection of revealed truth*. Notice that the writer doesn't warn against persistent sin 'after we've received Christ' (or anything that describes conversion) but instead says: "**after we have received the knowledge of the truth.**"

It becomes clear then that this sin is not a moral one at all! It concerns knowledge and how the Jew responded to the knowledge he had gained. It's nothing less than the sin of *wilful rejection of knowledge* and *unbelief*. So how could this be relevant in any way to the true believer? But it's certainly an apt description of the danger that some of these uncommitted, first-century Jews were apparently facing.

And notice that the writer says: "**if we deliberately keep on sinning**". This sin - that of rejection of revealed truth (and consequently a rejection of Christ himself) - was not the result of a *spur-of-the-moment judgement* on the part of these Jews. The writer is describing a *wilful continuation* in an *attitude* of unbelief - a confirmed *state of heart*!

The here too, that the word 'receive' (*lambánō*) in this verse doesn't imply a passive reception. It means: to *take hold of, take up, attain*. This is the '*once and for all*' enlightenment of chapter six.. And the word 'knowledge' (*epignosis*), implies a *thorough awareness*. These Jews had been fully

informed and knew perfectly well the difference between the Old Testament and the teaching of the New Testament. This sin was then a wilful rejection of that knowledge!

And if, in spite of this awareness, the individual persisted in the sin of unbelief, the writer asserts that “no sacrifice for sins is left”. (v 26)

A strange expression indeed unless understood in this particular context. If the almost-saved Jew was to abandon Christ and revert back to Old Testament rituals, he should be aware that this practice would now be entirely pointless! The sacrifices would have no further meaning - no possible significance – because the Lamb of God to whom they pointed, had already come! There could be no future fulfilment - no further sacrifice for sin!

“but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.” (v.27)

Unbelief is a serious matter! *1 John 5* is of particular relevance here:

“We accept human testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God accepts this testimony. Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” (*1 John 5:9-12*)

Deny God's testimony of about and you're calling Him a liar – exactly as Adam implied in the garden of Eden!

The writer then drives home his point.

“Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot.” (*Verses 28-29*)

Going back to Old Testament Judaism would be tantamount regarding Christ as *nothing* - treating him with contemptuous indifference! Trampling him underfoot!

The writer goes on:

“... who has treated as an unholy thing (a common thing – one that has no meaning) the blood of the covenant that *sanctified* them...” (or ‘set them apart’) (*italics and brackets mine*)

The word translated 'treated' here (*hegeomai*) conveys the idea of: 'to deem' 'consider', It denotes a conscious judgement resting on a deliberate weighing of the facts.

And what would be this conscious judgement? That the blood of the Covenant was an *unholy* thing! Nothing less than concluding Christ's blood to be *unholy* – that is: *common-place - nothing special*. It would be to claim that he had died like any *ordinary* man - a death no different to anyone else's and his teaching therefore a delusion and a lie!

This deliberate, contemptuous rejection of the Messianic sacrifice of the Son of God was the terrible willful sin of apostate Jews who treated with contempt the very blood that sanctified them.

But then people say: 'Look - these people had been *sanctified* - they must have been *saved* Jews'. Not at all! Sanctified means *set apart* - not necessarily *justified*. It often bears its simple meaning of 'set apart' or 'set aside' for a particular purpose.

Consider the following verse:

“For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband.” (1 Corinthians 7:14)

Here, to be *sanctified* is to be *set apart* for the work of the Holy Spirit preceding salvation – as happened with these Jews.

In Peters letter to the churches, there is a similar clear line of causation.

“To God’s elect.....who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood....” (1 Peter 1:2) (italics mine)

We are firstly *set apart* (or *sanctified*) for the work of the Holy Spirit - a work which then leads to faith and consequent justification by faith.

And the Spirit's sanctifying work is continued on in the believer's daily walk.:

“But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Corinthians 6:11) (italics mine)

And these Jews had certainly- as a nation - been 'sanctified' by the blood of Christ (depicted in the blood of the Passover lamb which delivered them from Egypt. It was because of that blood that Israel could be *set apart* as God's own inheritance among the nations. As Yahweh says in

“You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (*Exodus 19:4-5*)

Set apart (sanctified) by Jehovah, the Jews certainly enjoyed many privileges. As Paul explains in his letter to the Roman church:

“...the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.” (*Romans 9:4-5*)

Give these privileges, how much greater their sin, should these Jews reject the Messiah they had come to know about so undeniably!

And now the writer goes on to describe the individual who commits this sin of unbelief as someone who has “insulted the Spirit of grace.”

It's the Holy Spirit who offers eternal life as a free gift of grace. Any reversion to Judaism would be a return to a system of self-reliance - a reliance on the works of the Law.

When warning the Galatian church against the dangers of the Judaizers among them, Paul said

“You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.” (*Galatians 5:4*)

Rejecting the concept of grace and turning back to a reliance on dead works under the law was a particular danger for the Jew. It would be an insult to the Holy Spirit – an abandoning of the very concept of salvation on the basis of grace. It would also be to suggest that any blessing they had received as a nation, would have been based - not on grace- but on their own merits.

The apostle made this clear when writing to the believers in Rome:

“but the people of Israel, who pursued the law as the way of righteousness, have not attained their goal..... Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works.” (*Romans 9:31-32*)

Rejection of the knowledge of the truth would be failure to accept the One who was “full of grace and truth” (*John 1:14*) and who brought them grace – rather than the law!

“The law was given through Moses but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (*John 1:17*).

And now the writer gives the advice necessary avert this terrible sin of apostasy:

“You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.” (*Hebrews 10:36*)

Persevering in this context doesn't mean living a Christian life to the very end - much like the perseverance of the Calvinist's *TULIP*: that would clearly be *justification by works*. The writer's meaning, in the context of the warnings given in this letter, is that should any of his readers be wavering in their commitment, they needed to hang on to what they'd been taught until they had “done the will of God”.

And what is meant here by doing the *will* of God? That too is quite evident by the context. God's *will* for them was that they come to the point of full acceptance of Christ by faith: a sincere reception of the Messiah. *Then* they would receive the promise of eternal rest vouchsafed to the true believer in chapter 4 of this letter.

And in case any of this is still in doubt, listen to the concluding statement in this chapter:

“But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, *but to those who have faith and are saved.*” (*italics mine*)

In conclusion, then, we can confidently assert that the book of Hebrews in no way runs counter to the general teaching of Scripture or holds any fears whatsoever for the genuine child of God. There has been a general failure to correctly understand the context - both in respect of its general intended audience and the particular subset who are the target of the specific warnings. Many have failed to appreciate that the warnings are given in light of the danger of *one particular sin* - that of apostasy by a first century Jew!

The true believer is *in Christ* - and nothing in heaven or on earth, in time or in space, can change that blessed relationship. As Paul says when writing to the believers in Rome:

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (*Romans 8:37-39*)