

**Love, Fear, and Assurance:  
God's Work of Salvation in Hebrews**

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*“So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years —...  
Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt  
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure  
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words  
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which  
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture  
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate.”*

*— T.S. Eliot*

## Introduction

Every theological endeavor is a challenge one. When it comes to the theme of God's election, predestination, God's sovereignty, versus human responsibility, agency, moral actions, it always seems like an exhaustible and endless effort, since this is an issue on which many battles have already been fought, a lot of time has been spent, and the idea of an agreement between the parties seems implausible. The feeling I have when attempting to write about this subject is the same as that expressed by the poet T.S. Eliot found in the epigraph of this work: "...here I am... trying to learn to use words, and every attempt is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure..."<sup>1</sup>

One of the biggest dangers we face when we try to engage in heated discussions like this one is that, right from the start, we want to defend the side with which we identify. For example, in the universe to which I belong, which tends to elevate the Reformed Tradition over all others, we feel comfortable downplaying human agency in relation to divine sovereignty. As long as God always appears sovereign (even if unbiblically), that's fine. If we seem to suggest a certain autonomy of freedom on the part of man in being responsible for his actions, we put ourselves on thorny ground and we run the risk of being despised before we even have the chance to finish our reasoning. The problem is that only feeding our point of view doesn't do any good, it doesn't provide us with clarity, it doesn't bring us closer to the truth and, in the end, it can feed a sinful tendency to always want to be right.

This preliminary comment was necessary because this essay engages with one of these heated discussions. This work aims to answer the question: "is it possible for a Christian to lose his salvation?". Although this question belongs to the area of systematic theology, involving themes such as apostasy, soteriology, grace, etc., this work takes on a more exegetical character. It is not uncommon to find massive works that develop heavy systems of inferences and deductions to prove a point – and works like that are necessary to test the limits of our ideas and formulations–, but the starting point of Christian theology must always be the Revelation. A good theologian never neglects the exegesis of the sacred text – and must accept to be guided by it, regardless of the conclusions one may reach.

For this reason, the base text of this work will be the letter to the Hebrews. And that for a simple reason: Hebrews is by far the most contended text in Scripture when it comes to the theme of apostasy, salvation, and the sort. Specially chapter 6, where we have a confuse state of affair that can represent a challenge for both Calvinist and Arminians to interpret. As the New Testament scholar Harold W. Attridge once put: "The stern of the first verses... has occasioned considerable discomfort in the history of interpretation."<sup>2</sup> The text is clearly talking about those who have "fallen away" (6.6), but it goes on to say that these same ones are "impossible to restore them to repentance." (4–6). It's no easy task to understand, and more important, to apply this text. It definitely represents a challenge for a Calvinist who affirms that the elect cannot lose his salvation, but it's also a challenge for an Arminian who needs to face the reality that, once this individual has fallen away, it's impossible to restore him to repentance.

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<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot, "East Coker" in *The Complete Poems & Plays* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1969), 182.

<sup>2</sup> Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 167.

The approach I adopt in this work is of retreat. If a group is out on an expedition in the wilderness and a person gets lost, it is easier to find him from a bird's eye view of the whole, say, with a helicopter, than just focusing on the place where he got lost. Likewise, the answer I offer in this work is a comprehensive answer, stepping back on the issue for a moment to have a glimpse of the whole, so that one can approach the text not anchored in the fear of losing one's salvation, but firm in the love of the One who promised it. The apostle Paul, praying for the Ephesians, prayed that they would be rooted and grounded in love, so they "may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that [they] may be filled with all the fullness of God." (Eph 3:18–19)

I aim to show in this work how the author of Hebrews intends to communicate with the same intention to the Hebrews, not fear and threat, but love and encouragement, so that the saints are edified and structured on the Way towards salvation.

### **Preliminaries Exegetical Issues**

First and foremost, we need to understand our object of study and establish the parameters of our research. Hebrews is a long letter (thirteen chapters) and assessing it in enough detail in its entirety would require much more space and time than I have for this essay. Therefore, the first decision to be made is what will be the pericope used in our assessment, lest we end up focus only on the systematical aspect of our theme and neglect the primary goal of this work: interpretation of Scripture. Having said that, the pericope is Hebrews 6:4–7.

One last comment is necessary regarding the systematic nature of our work. A broad and common notion of the term "apostasy" will be adopted, which is the abandonment of the faith. Even when someone converts to a new religion, that can be considered a case of apostasy. As Scot McKnight wisely observed, "theoretically speaking, all conversions are apostasies, and all apostasies are therefore conversions. Everyone who converts leaves a former faith, even if that faith is ill-defined."<sup>3</sup> Many, in the obstinate attempt to try to make the text fit into their theological systems, end up changing the focus of the interpretive and exegetical task to a redefinition of the terms in use, in this case, the word apostasy itself. Here, apostasy assumes its common usage, of *one's abandonment of faith*. We now need to identify the nature and cause of this *abandonment* in our pericope, and then answer our question: can a Christian, a true Christian, elect by God, born again, commit apostasy? Can a saved person lose his salvation? And the even more important question, regardless of if the answer is yes or no: Is that what the author of Hebrews is saying?

Some things we need to consider: First, the text speaks of some enlightened ones. Who are these enlightened ones? Those who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and have fallen? Are they genuine, born-again

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<sup>3</sup> Scot McKnight, Hauna Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing faith: stories of conversion and apostasy* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 7.

Christians? Are these believers who are backslidden but saved? Or genuine Christians who have lost their salvation? Or even: is all this a rhetorical resource using a hypothetical situation? Second, the text uses an image of a land that absorbs rain and yields a harvest, and the land that produces thorns and weeds and is burned. Does this illustration have a direct relationship with such "enlightened ones", or is it an illustration that begins a new section in the text? Or is this an illustration after all? Or does this image explain something previously exposed in the speech? Does it shed light in the understanding of our pericope at all? Third, the author talks about something impossible to happen (being restored to repentance). What is impossible? Is this a real impossibility or a great difficulty? (Let us remember the passage of the rich man and the kingdom of heaven—Mat 19:23). Is this impossibility general, or just to the non-elected? And finally, this is not the only warning found in Hebrews. As we shall see, there are five passages known as “warning passages.” Is there any interdependent relationship between them? Or are we dealing with a pericope isolated from everything else? These are the four preliminary points that will guide our research and hopefully help us reach the expected result.

## Background and Context

The starting point of any interpretation of a given text is to identify its author and its audience. In the case of Hebrews, we have already dealt with this first difficulty right from the beginning, because the letter does not contain a reference to the author, the New Testament as a whole does not help in this case, as it does not address the authorship of Hebrews either. Throughout the history of the Church, many names were listed as candidates for this list, although right in the first century, the author in the references to the letter of Hebrews was not addressed, like in Clement of Rome (I Clement), Polycarp (Philippians) and the Shepherd of Hermas (Visions).

Still in the second century, Eastern Christians, such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen, attributed the authorship of Hebrews to the apostle Paul.<sup>4</sup> The oldest papyrus of Hebrews (P46) follows Paul's letter to the Romans. In other words, it is within the *Corpus Paulinus*.<sup>5</sup> There are many common themes between Paul and Hebrews, however, the distinctions also catch our attention: vocabulary, form of citation, exclusive themes (priesthood of Christ). The author places himself alongside the readers (2:3) as having received the gospel from the first generation of Christians. This, without a doubt, is a strange stance when compared to what we find in the Pauline letters. Paul makes a point of saying that he received the gospel directly from the Lord Jesus. Currently, few defend Pauline authorship. Despite the difficulty of establishing the authorship of Hebrews, it does not alter the canonicity of the book, “given that the author is apparently part of the apostolic circle (13:23) and specifically acknowledges that the message of the book was ‘attested to us by those who heard’ the Lord (2:3), a clear reference to the apostles. Thus, Hebrews clearly presents itself as an apostolic book.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: a new translation with introduction and commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2001)

<sup>5</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, “Hebrews” in Michael J. Kruger ed., *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: the gospel realized* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 414.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Another fundamental point to consider is the audience of the text. The problem is that Hebrews deviates from the basic pattern of letters found in the Bible, where the beginning contains an introduction (authorship) and a greeting (to the recipient). The fact that Hebrews does not contain these characteristics makes us suspicious above all of its genre as a "letter". N.T. Wright and Michael Bird suggest that "Hebrews is a homily in letter form, written by a Christian leader."<sup>7</sup> The exact recipients of this letter are unknown. If we know little about its origin and its author, we also know very little about the readers it addressed. The traditional designation that remained in Antiquity was "The Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Hebrews", but its original title was limited to the expression "To the Hebrews," perhaps to highlight the fact that this document was written and addressed to people who knew the Old Testament and the Jewish system of sacrifices well, having received the gospel from the mouth of eyewitnesses within Judaism, had been going through trials and were no longer new in faith.<sup>8</sup> Some passages in this letter even suggest that its readers lived under pressure to renounce the Christian faith because of the persecution against them. Some were ridiculed and exposed to distress; others had been arrested; others had had their goods confiscated (10:32-34). None of them, however, had reached the point of paying the price for their fidelity to Christ with their lives (12.4). For these reasons, the recipients of the letter have been linked to one of two locations: they were either Jews residing in Rome, or Jews from Palestine, more specifically Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup>

The Portuguese New Testament Scholar, Manuel Alexandre Júnior, calls our attention not to ignore the fact that nowhere in the letter are the original readers referred to as "Hebrews" or "Jews." He then asks, "Were the recipients of the letter Christians Jews, Gentiles, or both?"<sup>10</sup> His answer is that the early church seemed to have no doubts: the first readers were Jewish Christians. And this should serve us, since the entire letter presupposes one or more recipient communities with in-depth knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures, especially the Pentateuch. This was the unanimous conviction of scholars until the end of the 19th century.<sup>11</sup>

Although we don't know much about these two very important items, the little we know is enough to establish a parameter. First, we know that the letter was intended for believers, which could be a church, or different communities in a region. In this case, the first point we consider is that the content of the letter is for those who have been saved, those who have heard the gospel and are now Christians. Second, we know that it was written in a context of persecution. Both features will serve our analysis and interpretation of the passage.

### **Hebrews 6:4–7 analysis**

As we established above, we need to assess four features of Hebrews chapter 6 in order to have more clarity of the letter and the author's intention with this warning. First, who are "those who have once been enlightened" in verse 4? Second, the image of the

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<sup>7</sup> N.T. Wright, Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 714.

<sup>8</sup> Manuel Alexandre Júnior, *O Novo Testamento: uma introdução histórica, retórico-literária e teológica* (São Paulo: Vida Nova, 2021), 533.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 534.

land in verse 7, what is that about? Third, what the author means by “impossible” at the beginning of verse 4? And fourth, is this warning isolated or independent from the other “warning passages” in the letter? I am going to deal with all these issues at once, because they are interrelated and interdependent.

The first difficulty we face in interpreting Hebrews 6:4-7 can be mitigated if we view the pericope as part of the whole. New Testament scholar, Moisés Silva, puts it this way: “An important feature we discovered is that Hebrews 6:4–6 is not the only passage of this type in the text. In fact, there are four other passages called “warning passages”... When we take the argument of the book as a whole, it seems less likely that these four warnings were dealing with different situations... ”<sup>12</sup> Moisés, like countless scholars, understands that the passage in question cannot be interpreted ignoring its relationship with four others of the same genre within the book. It is important to emphasize that the proximity between these passages is not only due to their genre (exhortation, warning), but also to their content and common objectives.<sup>13</sup>

Another challenge that the interpreter of Hebrews will face is establishing a clear structure for the letter. “Some of the difficulty in analyzing the structure of Hebrews is due not the lack of structural indices, but to their overabundance. Hebrews constantly foreshadows themes that receive fuller treatment elsewhere and frequently provides brief summaries that resume and refocus earlier developments.”<sup>14</sup> Among the works that contribute most significantly to this subject is George H. Guthrie's analysis in *The Structure of Hebrews: a text-linguistic analysis*. Guthrie follows an eclectic approach using discourse analysis. According to Guthrie, “at the heart of discourse analysis is the effort to understand the paragraphs in the discourse.”<sup>15</sup> About discourse analysis, “[it] is an attempt to understand language beyond the level of the sentence (paragraph, speech, genre), but without neglecting the importance of the sentence itself (word, phrase, clause).”<sup>16</sup> Guthrie's most significant contribution is the identification of limiters in the discourse, called “turning points”, considering the *elements of cohesion*. “Cohesion occurs when the interpretation of some element in the discourse belongs to another. One presupposes the other in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by resorting to it.”<sup>17</sup> Guthrie recognizes a chiasmic structure in Hebrews, where Heb. 6:4–8 is the central point of the exhortation material. In other words, the passage we propose to analyze here is pivotal for understanding the entire book, as it is probably the culmination of the exhortation. Another important contribution comes from the 1992 article written by New Testament scholar Scot McKnight on how we should deal with the warning passages. In his view, “a synthesis of each component as revealed in each warning passage provides clarity on the meaning of a given component in a single passage.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Moisés Silva, “Perfection and Eschatology in Hebrews,” *Westminster Theological Journal*. 39.1 (1976), 120.

<sup>13</sup> Rômulo Monteiro, *Caminhando na Perfeição: a perseverança dos santos em Hebreus 6* (Niterói, RJ: Editora Concílio, 2018), kindle.

<sup>14</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> George H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: a text-linguistic analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 37.

<sup>16</sup> Stanley E. Porter ed., *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), 198.

<sup>17</sup> Porter, *Handbook*, 205.

<sup>18</sup> Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *Trinity Journal*, 13 (1992), 26.

Therefore, expressions such as "fallen away" or "drift away" must be analyzed on a single cumulative basis. For McKnight, only a synthetic approach provides understanding of the problematic exhortation and warning passages.

Given these two important contributions, we then see that the warning passages cannot be seen in isolation, but that there is a unity in both the genre and the discourse, and that this unity serves the general purpose of the letter. And from Guthrie, we learn that pericope 6:4–8 represents the climax of this structure, being of fundamental importance for the interpretation of the whole. From now on, then, we discard approaches to the letter to Hebrews that treat the body as interdependent sections, like Dale Moody.<sup>19</sup>

The next challenge our passage offers us is to identify the people described in 6:4–6. There are those who argue that we have the description of authentic Christians, not nominal ones (McKnight). In this case, the text apparently teaches us apostasy as possible and even probable, contrary to the Calvinist understanding. On the other hand, the understanding that we have the description of wicked people (Grudem) comes up against the specificity of the experience described in verses 4-5 by adjectival participles that appear to describe something that goes far beyond a mere external or phenomenological confession of faith.<sup>20</sup> The option of understanding readers not as individuals but as a covenant community also encounters obstacles in cases where the author clearly focuses on the individual. The first thing we have to notice is that our passage (4–7) is prefaced by γὰρ. This conjunction basically has three functions: explanatory, inferential or causal. The text seems to indicate an explanation for laying down the elementary principles.<sup>21</sup> By using γὰρ the author explains why they should go to perfection or leave the basic elements: it is impossible to renew a certain type of person to repentance (εις μετανοιαν) again (παλιν). When explaining the possibility of renewal, the author describes the group of "unable" through several adjectival participles (vv. 4–6). The interpreter's great dilemma in this passage is to share the weight of the explanation "it is impossible to renew" with the character of the individuals (enlightened, have tasted the heavenly gift, etc.). How can enlightened people not be renewed? As a rule, interpretations have paths towards emphasizing or devaluing one of these two elements.<sup>22</sup> And that's understandable. When we deal with a dilemma, our first instinct is to disregard one side in the search for easy solutions, in this case, weakening the real gravity of the impossibility that the text presents or diminishing the weight of the fall or the blessings. Behind this challenge is the doctrine of the believer's perseverance.<sup>23</sup> According to Brazilian pastor and theologian Rômulo Monteiro, participles are a key piece to understanding what is happening in this passage.

Participles appear in our passage (6:4–6) in three key moments (1) anticipating and adverbially following the exhortation in 6:1; (2) identifying the group of enlightened/fallen ones – these same participles prepare the reader (as background) for the declaration of the impossibility of renewal for repentance; and finally (3) developing the notion of impossibility of renewal. In short, an understanding of them (nature and function) is simply essential.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Dale Moody, *Apostasy: a study in the epistle to the Hebrews and in Baptist history* (Greenville, SC: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1946)

<sup>20</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 219.

<sup>22</sup> Monteiro, *Caminhando da Perfeição*, kindle.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



He proceeds to explain:

We can ensure that we better understand the exhortation φερώμεθα (let us continue) through the participle καταβαλλόμενοι (laying) and furthermore, we better understand the impossibility of renewal through the participles ἀνασταυροῦντας (crucifying) and παραδειγματίζοντας (exposing to shame). The two participles surrounding our order φερώμεθα are negative. Either by the explicit presence of μὴ πάλιν (not again) or by the lexis of ἀφέντες (to leave). Of the two, the one that can provide us with more details is καταβαλλόμενοι.<sup>25</sup>

It is clear that participles are a key element in the interpretation of this passage. It follows that what is being prohibited there is laying the basic foundations of Judaism. The sentence (Ἀδύνατον γὰρ...) that follows the participle aims to explain this particular detail. There are two pieces of information about participles that make us think of a cohesive group. Firstly, we are dealing with adjectival participles that follow a single article. First of all, it is important to understand that the use of a single article before the adjectival participles forces us to believe that it is a single individual, group or class that incorporates all the qualities presented.<sup>26</sup> In an adjectival participle, the emphasis is on the person or thing described or thought of. In our case, the type of person. In other words, we cannot dissect the participles in isolation. What the author wants is for us to follow him in his argument. For this to be accomplished, we need to understand what kind of person he is thinking of. In this case, enlightened, who have fallen away and are unable to be renewed to repentance. And secondly, the aorist participle has the background nuance. Thus, reinforcing the point that the author is not interested in the details of the qualities and the problem (the fall), but in the general picture to be idealized – these people who were enlightened and fell.

This gives us ammunition to think more clearly who these enlightened ones are. Scot McKnight presents us with four views:<sup>27</sup> 1) The Hypothetical View, 2) The Phenomenological-False Believer View, 3) The Phenomenological-True Believer View, and 4) The Covenant Community View. The first view argues that the warnings are real, but the sin is a hypothetical situation described, because true believers cannot fall from their state of grace. The second argues that the warning is real, and the sin can be committed indeed, but those who commit it are not believers. The third view, which is McKnight's own view, argues that "the warnings are given to believers who can genuinely commit the sin. Those who can commit this sin are presently believers in every observable sense."<sup>28</sup> And finally, the last view argues that this passage deals with a collective, not an individual, category. The warning is not concerned with a individual who might fall away, but with a "covenant community."

From what we've seen so far, we can rule out the first two positions. As much as some try to argue by bringing 1 John 19 to the subject, there is no indication in Hebrews of this treatment given in John. It is true that the Reformed standard of interpretation is that when a passage presents us with difficulty, we must look to other clearer passages for the solution. This is the method of interpreting Scripture with Scripture itself. The problem is that we shouldn't hide behind this method every time a text appears challenging to us. As true as what John said is, it does not mean that the author of Hebrews

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<sup>25</sup> Monteiro, *Caminhando da Perfeição*, kindle.

<sup>26</sup> John A. Sproule, "Parapesontas in Hebrews 6.6," *Grace Theological Journal*. 2.2 (1981), 34.

<sup>27</sup> McKnight, *Warning Passages*, 24.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

is referring to the same phenomenon. In the case of 1 John, it is evident that those who abandon the faith fit into the phenomenological-false believer view. But it is not the same in Hebrews. Therefore, we discard the phenomenological-false believer position, and also the hypothetical position, not because it is hypothetical in nature, but in the terms that McKnight describes, in which such sin cannot be committed, as it is impossible for a true Christian to commit it. This is not the treatment given in the text, but exactly the opposite. What the text says is impossible is not for the Christian to commit such a sin, but if he commits it(!), it is impossible to restore him into repentance. So, the odds are against the defender of that position. which leaves us with the last two.

Michael Horton, for example, applies his theological framework to texts like this as follows: all passages of security are anchored in the so-called covenant of redemption. In other words, they are not based on human response. Regarding the role of warnings, Horton understands that they are not hypothetical, that is, they are real, but they do not follow the soteriological implications of the Arminian system. The reason is that Covenant Theology recognizes not only two types of people (saved and damned), but three (saved, unsaved and participants in the covenant community who experience the means of grace but are not regenerated). In his words, "the circle of alliance is wider than the circle of election."<sup>29</sup> Thus, those saved from this warning are the participants who benefit from the alliance but are not saved. They are "phenomenological-believers." Roughly distinguished from the second vision, but still very close. Michael Horton can be placed as a halfway point between the second view and the covenantal one. There are two problems. As we saw above, there are clear references to individuals (in the singular) rather than the plural in Hebrews. Second, Horton falls into what we just reported in the paragraph above. His proposal of "a wider circle" does not hold up exegetically in the book of Hebrews. Here Rômulo Monteiro is very helpful again:

This is not denying the existence of people who have an exclusively external or phenomenological faith, as the apostle John informs us in 1 John 2:19. Rather, what is being stated is that the author of Hebrews assures us that in the New Covenant, unlike the first, we have a direct action in the "conscience" and in the "heart (internal action). Thus, everyone who benefits (or is a participant) of the New Covenant has its interior purified. The circle of the new covenant is *exactly the same* as that of the election.<sup>30</sup>

D.A. Carson also sheds light on this matter:

"...New Covenant people are by definition given a new heart and empowered by the Holy Spirit to walk in holiness, to love righteousness, and to delight in God. This means that the extent to which the N.T. writers thought of themselves as heirs of the New Covenant, they could not think of themselves as if they were not endowed with the Holy Spirit, regenerated, and transformed.... It is of the essence of the New Covenant that those who are in it have received a new heart, have been purified and have been purified. received the Holy Spirit."<sup>31</sup>

We then realize that what is new in the New Covenant is precisely the quality of the community created by God. The entire community has internalized the law. Everyone knows God in the deepest sense. There is, therefore, no "broader circle" in the New

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Horton, "A Classic Calvinist View" in Gundry, Stanley N., Pinson, J. Matthew eds. *Four Views on Eternal Security* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 36.

<sup>30</sup> Monteiro, *Caminhando da Perfeição*, kindle.

<sup>31</sup> D.A. Carson, Stanley Porter, *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: open questions in current research* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 11–13.

Covenant or one distinct from the circle of election. Therefore, God does not speak to the participants in the New Covenant in the same way as he spoke to the participants in the Old Covenant.

We then conclude that the enlightened ones in our passage are participants in the new covenant, that is, elected Christians. Attempts to attribute this warning to non-Christians do not do justice to the passage. How should we face it then? Adopt Scot McKnight's view that, in fact, genuine Christians can fall from grace and literally lose their salvation? We must be cautious with this approach. We need to be very careful about "systematic leaps" in our work. Before drawing conclusions by inference to answer systematic questions, we must carefully look at the author's intentions and see if such questions and conclusions fit in the text. McKnight draws attention to something very important, which in fact other theologians also share, the notion that "salvation" is a future state in the letter to the Hebrews. N.T. Wright states: "Many theologians and traditions argue that salvation is something that can be lost or forfeited. However, I would point out that in Hebrews salvation is essentially future!"<sup>32</sup> Even though that's true and helpful to shed light in our passage, we need to be careful to not despise the present character of the passage. As G.K. Beale points out: "There is a debate about whether the 'rest' of Heb 3–4 has been inaugurated with Christ's first coming or whether it is a reality only at the final consummation."<sup>33</sup> He will argue that this "rest" is more likely to be future, although there are aspects of the present, that is, it has certainly been inaugurated, but it will be complete in the future.

The usefulness of the example given by the author in verse 7, the image of the earth that produces fruit and the one that produces thorns, becomes more evident. This is why our pericope of analysis of chapter 6 is from verses 4 to 7, not 6. Because the next section of the chapter still serves the first. To the original audience, who certainly knew the Old Testament, the analysis of the earth bearing fruit was familiar. The origin of the illustration is unknown, but there are several recurrences in the Old Testament (Gen 3:17–18; Dt 11:11; 29:23–27; Is 5:1–5; Ez 19:10–14, etc.) and in the New Testament (Mt 13:1–9; Mk 4:3–9; Lk 8:4–8). Outside of the canonical material, Attridge recognizes similar imagery in Philo and rabbinic sources.<sup>34</sup> Just as we saw above in verses 4–6, verses 7 and 9 are also prefaced by the explanatory conjunction γάρ. Along with Romans, Hebrews is one of the books that uses this conjunction the most.<sup>35</sup> As with the previous verses, we have yet another explanation – like an "explanation of the explanation." This example of two lands works as an illustration (or an "illustrated explanation") of the explanation above. In our Christian walk, we are like a land. Everyone who is exposed to the rain will produce something of this - and an important detail is that the author of Hebrews doesn't bother to detail that all the "lands" that exist are exposed to rain. He is addressing a specific group of people (New Covenant Christians), so he assumes that everyone there is like lands, and that they were exposed to such rain (the Holy Spirit). This confirms the two points we have seen so far: first, the "enlightened ones" are participants in the new covenant; second, salvation will only be fully completed in a future period (the time necessary for the earth to drain the rain and produce some type of fruit).

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<sup>32</sup> Wright, Bird, *New Testament*, 717.

<sup>33</sup> G.K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 144.

<sup>34</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews*, 172.

<sup>35</sup> Monteiro, *Caminhando da Perfeição*, kindle.

Wright and Bird are helpful here again. They remind us that the previous warning passage (3:7–4:13) is a kind of exegesis of Psalm 95, which greatly helps us understand what the author is trying to communicate – since we also concluded above that these warning passages do not work in isolation but are part of an argument as a whole.

The psalm warns against copying the Israelites of the wilderness generation, who rebelled and were not allowed to enter the promised land (3.7–12). The writer's point is subtle: the psalm speaks to David's generation about still 'not entering' the coming 'rest', which must mean that the psalm was envisaging a 'rest' for which the entry into the land was just a foretaste. Scripture itself therefore points to a fulfilment out beyond what Moses had been promising. The readers are then to see themselves as like that generation, on a pilgrimage towards God's promised future, and they must not make the same mistake. The challenge then focuses on the word 'Today': God had acted definitively in Jesus the Messiah, so the longed-for new day had to come. There was therefore still a 'rest' to enter– or, as it might be, a 'rest' to forfeit (3.12–13). There will be a new kind of land, a new sort of city, a new creation, which will be brought to full reality after the present heaven and earth have been 'shaken' (12.25–28). This will be the 'rest' which mirrors God's own 'rest' on the seventh day of creation. This is the 'Today' to which Israel's scriptures had always pointed. The readers of the letter must therefore get rid of continuing unbelief (3.14–19) and press on to the goal, reckoning with the danger of disobedience and the inherent power of God's word (4.1–13).<sup>36</sup>

Wright offers a very helpful biblical-theological perspective. The author of Hebrews is drawing on an image from the Old Testament (which he and his audience know very well). God has a wonderful plan for his people, a "rest", just as he had with the people of the old covenant. What prevented the people there from experiencing such rest was precisely discouragement, the abandonment of faith in the promise. It is exactly this perspective that sheds light on our text: the enlightened ones are those who are part of the covenant with God – in this case, the new covenant. The illustration shows the two possible scenarios within this covenant: those that produce good fruit and those that do not. Just as in Jeremiah 26, those who produce bad fruit will be destroyed, but those who produce good fruit will be considered faithful servants. The entire analogy being applied to the present reality, of an eschatology inaugurated by the person and work of Christ, who is the only one capable – and sufficient – to lead us to the rest promised by God.

### **Apostasy: reality or hypothesis**

After the conclusions drawn from our analysis of the text, we now focus on answering the question we proposed at the beginning: according to the author of Hebrews, can a Christian lose his salvation? In other words: is the apostasy that our passage refers to a hypothesis or a reality? Firstly, without getting away from the point or playing semantic games, I want to propose that a hypothesis can only be valid if it must be real. If I exhort my congregation not to eat dinosaur meat, even though I could draw a very interesting parallel or illustration, we know that this exhortation would have no real value, because it is simply impossible for that to happen. Even if we try to say that the exhortation is real, but the possibility of it happening is impossible – as in the case of the hypothetical vision – there is still no real practical value. If I exhort my congregation not to fly on a rainy day, even though I am committed to the real value of my exhortation, we know that a human being is not capable of flying anyway. So, my point is not against any hypothetical character that the exhortation may have, but with its unreal nature. As we

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<sup>36</sup> Wright, Bird, *New Testament*, 718.

saw above, he addresses members of the new covenant, and by members of the new covenant he means those who are genuine Christians – the text does not appear to make any exception to Christians as genuine or non-genuine. If the text of Hebrews was intended for new covenant Christians, we then conclude that it is counterproductive to assume that it is not for us. Any attempt to avoid facing this exhortation goes against the original purpose of the text.

So, what's the purpose of the warnings? I want to propose some criticisms of the conclusions proposed by Scot McKnight, even though he did an excellent job and greatly influenced my position. My criticism is on two fronts, exegetical and systematic. In relation to the text, I conclude that the premise that the passages should be read together and not in isolation is extremely important, at the same time, the synthetic approach that he proposes can cause the opposite effect. If we read only synthetically, we lose sight of the unique nuances of each warning passage. Another point is to view salvation only as something future and not present. As much as it is clear that the author of Hebrews is dealing with anticipation for something that will take place in the future, it is also clear that there is an inaugurated eschatology in place, as we see in chapter 1 itself. The presence of "these last days" is indicating a new dispensation, the beginning of something new. 'Today' is fundamental to understand this character in the argument. 'Today', as we saw, is not referring only to the present time, but to the rest God promised in the past, it's something that it's not overdue, but it's going on and it will be fulfilled, but through faith in Jesus, the only one capable of granting us this rest. This is important, because now comes my systematic critique of McKnight: salvation, although it will be accomplished in the future, cannot be viewed as "unfulfilled" in the present. As the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 1:14, the Holy Spirit "is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory." This is as clear as possible: until we finally acquire possession of our inheritance, the Spirit is the guarantee that it's ours. It's a sure thing, not a possibility. Our election is an assurance of our calling, and of our justification, and of our salvation (Rom. 8). Asserting that a Christian was elected and will not be saved on the last day is a contradiction. We are often tempted to look for easy solutions to difficult dilemmas, and I believe that accepting the idea of an elect not being saved is one of those cases.

The famous systematic theologian G. C. Berkouwer helps us deal with this dilemma. He says regarding faith and perseverance that "...it is necessary to keep in mind the great significance of admonition in the Holy Scriptures. Final perseverance is set before believers as a goal coupled with warnings."<sup>37</sup> Now, having a deeper understanding of our text, we can take a step back and look at the letter as a whole and understand that this is exactly the case. It is not a warning based on fear, but one of assurance based on God's unconditional love. Hebrews is an exaltation of the person and work of Christ, the one who assures us the 'rest.' This is how the letter begins, with Jesus being exhausted above the angels, and the first chapter (v. 14) ends with this idea: "are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?" Even though Angels are above man, Jesus is above as all, and the angels serve the purpose of ministering those who are to inherit salvation. This is the last sentence before the first warning (2:1–4).

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<sup>37</sup> G.C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Perseverance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 84.

The author, after the first warning, will return to this point in verses 14 to 18:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, *but he helps the offspring of Abraham*. Therefore, he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (Hb 2:14–18; my highlighting).

He emphasizes the fact that it is not the angels he helps, but the seed of Abraham. He is demonstrating God's faithfulness and steadfast love. This is the image that the author of Hebrews is communicating. God did not abandon his promises, he did not forget the blessings he promised his people. Rest is as possible today as it was then. This is the first perspective we need to have when reading Hebrews. It is a message of comfort, not a threat. What seemed to be lost is actually more possible than ever, because it is upon faith, not works. Faith in Jesus. What is the role of the warning? It is precisely through warning, as Berkouwer puts it, the means by which the Spirit keeps the elect on the Way. The hypothetical character of the passage lies precisely in its real nature. It is not a false warning, or an impossibility. It's a real hypothesis for real people, and that's precisely what makes it effective. Our consolation when reading Hebrews doesn't lay in the impossibility or unreality of the warning, on the contrary, it is precisely because of the reality of the hypothesis that our consolation is in the unshakable love of God and the perfect effectiveness of Christ's work, because "...I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ," (Phi 1:6) "For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham" (Heb 2:16).

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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