

The Sufficiency of Christ's Loving Assurance on Hebrews
Encouraging Others Against Apostasy Along as it is Called Today

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Πιστεύω; βοήθει μου τῇ ἀπιστίᾳ!
Μάρκος 9:24

I believe. Help my unbelief!
Mark 9:2

The Sufficiency of Christ's Loving Assurance on Hebrews *Encouraging Others Against Apostasy As Long As It Is Called Today*

The Letter to the Hebrews contains passages that raise complex questions on salvation among some of its famously acclaimed chapters about faith. This ironic dual perception can be intense, with chapter 11 being outstanding on the character of faith, and at the same time stirring up uneasiness to some about the assurance of believer's salvation in chapters 6 and 10. Nonetheless, understanding Hebrews is a rewarding challenge to those who want to delve into the richness of their faith.

The discussions regarding the topic of salvation in Hebrews can be so soteriologically divisive that might cloud a better interpretation of the author's meaning, due to judgments based on theological presuppositions. For that reason, interpreting the warning passages in Hebrews by looking into the book holistically may be a greater approach, keeping in mind that all letters have an audience and respond to factual backgrounds, and it is simply not meant to be interpreted solely in isolated chunks. Understanding the author's premises is like combing through the braids of lost dialogues that we no longer have access to, which makes it a difficult job. Nonetheless, it is not impossible.

While systematic theology interprets all major themes appearing in a specific letter of the New Testament along with other books in the Bible, thus avoiding the creation of "a canon inside the canon" by isolating them, the good exegete needs to avoid another risk: neglecting the interpretation of the book by itself. However, comparing a book against others can only be done diligently after the book itself is comprehended and analyzed at its best. This should be especially applied in the case of Hebrews since the authorship is unknown and we do not have access to other writings of the same author to compare.

Having that in mind, all discussions regarding salvation, faith, and apostasy in the book of Hebrews must certainly come from the understanding within the book itself first, making sure the author's scenario is on our minds in every possible way, and only then compared with how other New Testament authors approach them.

The present essay will explore how even the warning passages against apostasy in Hebrews are rooted in the sufficiency of Christ's assurance for the believer's salvation. The writer wants the audience to fully believe in Jesus' superiority over the Covenant of Works. To do so, he focuses on the assurance that comes from believing in Christ's sacrifice.¹ He explains it while drawing up a map of the relations between the believer's faith and the continuity of God's promises from the Old into the New Covenant.

For the author of Hebrews, the ultimate sin is unbelief, and the ultimate act of obedience is faith. He argues that this reality has been proven since the time of the patriarchs,

¹ The authorship of Hebrews is unknown, but this essay will refer to the author in the masculine, "in light of the masculine ending of the participle *diēgoumenon* in Hebrews 11:32." W. L. Lane, "Hebrews", em *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, Kindle Edition, (The IVP Bible Dictionary Series) (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997).

and after the sacrifice of Jesus, it still remains true. The eternal character of God has not changed. The author stresses that when highlighting the sin of distrust that prevented the Israelites from entering rest in the wilderness. He compares it to the consequences of that distrust during today's time of inaugurated eschatology. He argues, "If you abandon your faith today, you are deserting the promise of rest, the same thing your ancestors did, even if you are doing so in the name of the Old Covenant."

Another aspect of the author's argument is the focus on the present. There is no way of interpreting the letter without keeping the author's focus on the realm of time for two reasons.

First, because ignoring it due to soteriological apprehensions might deviate the author's arguments from his own goal. The way he chooses to assure salvation to the Hebrews is not by fast-forwarding to the future. The audience needed to know *today* what "salvation" looks like at the risk of ignoring it (not losing it, but by being completely unbeknownst to it.) All the conditional clauses and the "ifs" bring back the audience to an awareness of their present state.

Second, while some other letters in the New Testament may focus primarily on the things to come as a way of encouragement, the author of Hebrews heavily focuses on the decisions that matter *today* to demonstrate how there is no hope without faith. He does not diminish hope while doing so. For the writer, faith *is* the closer hope. In fact, he stresses that the end goal is "entering on rest" and how hope is "the anchor of the soul" (Hb. 6:19). Morgan summarizes: "Pistis, it seems, ideally based on recognition of the long-term faithfulness of God and the sacrifice of Jesus, is confirmed by confession, purifies its body and heart, and looks forward to the future in hope."²

However, to encourage the immature audience, he had to do one of the hardest jobs of the preacher: convince someone once again about something they had already known. This is why the message of keeping their faith is so prevalent. There is no hope without faith. Carson wisely observes how the discernment of the tools in each pastoral matter is indispensable: "Anyone who applies exactly the same spiritual remedy to these diverse ailments ought to have his license as spiritual physician immediately rescinded."³

The major problem within the community was not solely discouragement from persecution, but the risk of absence of faith altogether due to complete abandonment. Even though persecution might be one of the reasons for that abandonment, the author identifies that they were once again caressing the idea of going back to Judaism because their faith was not fully consolidated yet. He then delivers the harsh message that *there is no hope* for them outside Christ.

Can this process described by the author of Hebrews be called "loss of salvation"? This answer depends on the answer to the following question: *Is it the same thing to say that losing faith is losing salvation?* Today we ask the same question about Hebrews that the author does about the Israelites in his rhetorical reasoning: "For who were those who heard and yet rebelled?" (Hb. 3:16)

It appears that the author of Hebrews sees faith as a burning lamp. Without the oil of perseverance, it will not be lit anymore. What causes someone to lose faith? Is it possible for

² Theresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and the Early Churches* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 336.

³ D. A. Carson, "Reflections on Christian Assurance", *Westminster Theological Journal* 54, n° 1 (1992): 1-29.

a true believer to lose faith? The letter of Hebrews deals with these matters by breaking down salvation into the realm of the present time. If it feels like slow motion to us, it is because our faith is strong enough to have met future hope. But the planting, the watering, and the growth do not happen instantly.

Recognizing this issue of unbelief, the author stresses the need for unity within the community as one of the ways of fighting against it. He did not think that his words of exhortations were enough for their diminishing faith, but only the start of it all. To prevent others from going astray, he repeatedly calls their attention to the importance of mutual encouragement against apostasy.

The Hebrews' crisis

The authorship of Hebrews is unknown by the church, but today scholars agree that Paul is not the writer, since he says that did not receive the message of the Gospel from Jesus himself (Hb 2:3-4).⁴

Regarding the audience, the text of Hebrews provides us with clearer clues. We know the letter was not addressed to one specific individual but to a community, which the author feels responsible for exhorting and prays to see again, implying a personal relationship (Hb 13:19). They were undoubtedly Christians: "They had been brought to faith through the preaching of some who had direct access to Jesus' ministry (Hb 2:3), and the testimony of these witnesses had been endorsed by the tangible evidence of "signs and wonders," "various miracles" and "gifts of the Holy Spirit" (Hb 2:4)."⁵

In his absence, the author sent the letter to deal with urgent matters and the crisis within their community, coming with "words of exhortations." (Hb. 13:22). This might be the reason why the letter seems much more like a sermon and not as much as a letter sometimes. The author wanted the readers to feel their presence, and not focus on his absence, in such a troubling moment. This semornic and paraenetic characteristic of Hebrews makes it important even for today's reader.⁶

We can also infer that the audience possesses great knowledge of the patriarchs, the Old Covenant, and the Old Testament. All the arguments from the letter are based on historical, theological, and liturgical foundations from the Old Testament. According to Beale and Carson, "No NT book, with perhaps the exception of Revelation, presents a discourse so permeated, so crafted, both at the macro and microlevels, by various uses to which the older covenant texts are put, and his appropriation of the text is radically different from the book's apocalyptic cousin."⁷

The author quotes from the Old Testament in every chapter. Moses is a point of comparison to Jesus since the beginning of the letter (Hb. 3). In chapter 11, the author models faith by bringing up figures from the Old Testament. So the readers were certainly familiar

⁴ Simon J. Kistemaker e Michael J. Kruger, "Hebrews", em *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 413.

⁵ Lane, "Hebrews", 444.

⁶ N. T. Wright e M. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians*, Perlego Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019).

⁷ G. K. Beale e D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, Perlego Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

with them through Judaism, thus making it possible to understand the audience as Christian Jews struggling to grasp the continuity and discontinuity of their faith as Christians.

Jews who were coming to Christ and becoming a part of the Early Church had to face specific challenges, and Hebrews is one of the letters that deal with them the most. The Early Christians faced grave persecution. But on top of that, those who were Jews had enormous pressure to return to Judaism.

The letter to the Hebrews seems designed to persuade Jewish Christians not to go back to the forms of Jewish life that did not acknowledge Jesus as Messiah. Many will have felt pressure to do so, particularly under threat of persecution. The Jewish world, enjoying official Roman recognition, represented a much safer social and legal option than belonging to an unpopular sect. This explains the exhortations to endurance (see Heb. 2.1–4; 3.12–14; 10.39; 12.3–11) and the recollection of earlier harassment (Heb. 10.32–39).⁸

Therefore, the writer is not preaching to an audience that is simply wondering if they are saved or not. Even though the writer was confident in the salvation of his readers, they were actually facing the danger of completely abandoning Christ and returning to Judaism. Some of them already did.⁹ As the letter insists on tying the old and new dispensations together, the writer makes sure that readers understand how superior the New Covenant is compared to the one they are trying to go back to, and therefore sufficient. By stressing the importance of believing in Christ's sacrifice, the author reminds them so they don't fall into the sins of their ancestors who did not enter the rest.

It is necessary to keep in mind this background to understand each passage from Hebrews. A responsible exegesis of the text needs to take into consideration the whole message that the writer was trying to convey. Isolating the warning passages without taking into consideration that they are woven within the text deviates it from the intended meaning and produces more questions than answers.

On the Superiority of Christ's Sufficient Assurance

To persuade the readers about Christ's sufficient assurance, the author builds upon the superiority of the New Covenant, thus encouraging them to reignite their faith. He supports all these arguments by using Old Testament promises and prophecies as an argument from authority.

He starts by stating that God's Son is higher than the angels (Hb. 1). But even in His superiority, Jesus incarnated "to be made like his brothers in every aspect." (Hb. 2:17), making him a superior High-Priest. He presses on the matter: How do you assure the audience of Christ's perfect sacrifice and make them have full faith while explaining the future of their religious life?

⁸ Wright e Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians*.

⁹ R. Bruce Compton, "Persevering and Falling Away: A Reexamination of Hebrews 6:4-6", *Persevering and Falling Away: A Reexamination of Hebrews 6:4-6* 1 (1996): 135–67.

When comparing Jesus to Moses, the author first uses the analogy of building a house. Although Moses was a faithful servant, Christ is “faithful over God’s house as a son.” (Hb. 3:6) Jesus is not only more glorious but the one Moses was working for (Hb. 3:3). He finishes, “and we are his house *if* indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.” (Hb. 3:6) The conjunction *ἐάν* establishes a conditional cause, giving hints as to the role of persevering in faith for salvation.

This is the picture he is drawing to the audience: Moses served to help build the house, but God is the actual builder (Hb. 4:3). Therefore his Son, namely Jesus, is greater than the servant Moses. So one can only remain in (or as) the same house where Moses worked as a servant, that now has the faithful Jesus as Son *if* he keeps his faith in Christ. In other words, by leaving Jesus you are also deserting Moses since there is no Moses without Jesus today.

Then the author compares the Christian life to the journey of the Israelites in the wilderness under the guidance of Moses. He breaks down Psalm 95 to explain why they did not enter the rest. He states that the same prophecy is also true for today’s readers, explaining that “they were unable to enter because of unbelief.” (Hb. 3:19), and warning the Hebrews against the same sin. And who were those who did not enter the rest? The author answers that those who “were not *united by faith* with those who listened.” (Hb. 4:2). The author also stresses how even the works of Joshua were not the end of it all: “For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another one.” (Hb. 4:8). Even after Joshua, they were still waiting for rest.

Is it possible that the readers felt more safety in salvation in the Old Covenant and this is what the writer is responding to? Either way, he affirms the validity of God’s word in the present time: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Hb. 4:12) This is why he emphasizes, “Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.” (Hb 4:11). The word for disobedience is *ἀπειθειαν*, coming from the *πειθω* (to be persuaded), plus the *α* indicating “absence of”. We can translate it as “dispersuaded” and “unconfident.” The disobedience here means *losing the persuasion to faith*. On this perseverance, Calvin writes: “But though the completion of this rest cannot be attained in this life, yet we ought ever to strive for it. Thus believers enter it but on this condition, that by running they may continually go forward.”¹⁰

Back to the superiority of Christ’s priesthood, he delves into another office of Jesus. He first compared Jesus to the prophet Moses, and now is asserting his role as our High Priest. He reminds the audience of Christ’s relatability to them (Hb. 4:5) and accessibility (Hb. 4:16). He states that Christ is the perfect High Priest for He does not need to offer sacrifice for his own sins, since he is perfect (Hb. 5:3), making him superior to Aaron (Hb. 5:5).

The author then asserts how Christ was “designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.” (Hb. 5:10). Like the Old Testament figure, Jesus is not a priest by the Levitic order but has an eternal priesthood with no beginning or end. Once again, the author defines the superiority of Jesus. But this whole passage needs a closer look to understand other ways how the author expresses the superiority of Christ’s priesthood:

¹⁰ John Calvin, *John Calvin’s Commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews*, trad. John Owen, Kindle Edition (Louisville, KY: GLH Publishing, 2020).

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. (Hb. 5:7-10)

First, Christ is our intercessor. He was heard “because of his reverence.” (Hb. 5:7) The word *εὐλάβεια* is used to describe Christ’s caution, piety, and devotedness. The same characteristics the author is warning the Hebrews to have! So Jesus is the perfect example for them. Nonetheless, Jesus did this as a Son. He learned this obedience through suffering. And because He is perfect, he is the “source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.” (Hb. 5:9).

Here we see how the author connects Jesus to the priesthood in order to remind them of His perfection. He is the perfect High Priest through obedience, and therefore all those who obey him have eternal salvation. To put it simply, obedience is not a choice, but an obligation. The word used here is *ὕπακοή*, the same used by the Apostle Paul in Romans: “For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.” (Rm 5:19). He especially does it to bring attention to Christ’s perfection, as being the one of perfect obedience.

Now the author brings his narrative to a stop in his third warning passage to directly refer to the audience. It is important to notice this particular passage now, before analyzing all the warning passages together, because there is an explanation to the readers as to why he was saying all these things until that moment.

He calls out the audience on their immaturity. He wants them to have the ability to understand higher things about Christ, continuing his reasoning, but stops and says that “it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.” (Hb. 5:11) He affirms that they need someone who teaches them “the basic principles of the oracles of God” (Hb. 5:12), and stresses their need to “leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity.” (Hb. 6:1). This shows the spiritual health of the Hebrews. In other words, they still did not fully know who Jesus represented, and up until that point, this is what he was doing: presenting Jesus again to them. Not only the figure of Christ but the whole redemption plan from the beginning.

He comes back to the Old Testament echoes by reminding them about God’s promises to Abraham. Right after encouraging them once again that “those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (Hb. 6:12) he reminds the audience that Abraham received the promise after patiently waiting. (Hb. 6:15). Patience and endurance are tied to receiving the promise.

But how certain are these promises? He answers: “We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.” (Hb. 6:20). We have the promises in order to “have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set for us.” (Hb. 6:18).

The focus on God's oaths is important to the author, especially for four reasons: First, because he constructs many of his arguments based on verses of the Scriptures in which God makes an oath. Second, because he shows how faithful God is in keeping his promises and highlights God's eternal character.¹¹ Third, because of the present moment: "The oath of God, expressed in Ps. 110:4, *gives great assurance* to the people of God that he will fulfill the blessing of Abraham through Christ's redemptive work as superior high priest (6:17–20)."¹² Finally, because in the relational aspect of faith, "*pistis* is first exercised by God, who is faithful to his promises (10.3)".¹³ For Morgan, "Christian *pistis* is founded in the scripture."¹⁴

The author of Hebrews expresses the security of the assurance we receive from Jesus in one of the most beautiful ways in a specific verse in this passage: "We who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us." (Hb. 6:13). He calls this hope as the "anchor of the soul." But what does it mean to "fled for refuge", in which the author includes himself with the audience?

For L. T. Johnson, the author is alluding to "Abraham and the patriarchs, who wandered the land as aliens in search of the promised homeland (11:8–12)."¹⁵ Johnson also states that they were "fleeing to find refuge (...) as in a city of refuge or sanctuary."¹⁶ Hebrews 11:10 reminds the readers about the intent of Abraham's pilgrimage: "For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God."

He and his descendants knew they were "exiles on the earth" (Hb. 11:13) and died in faith: "For people who speak thus make it clear they are seeking a homeland." (Hb. 11:13) Johnson continues: "The characterization in either case provides a sharp image of readers who are not sure of their place in the world and are in need of what is stable and secure. The reason they have fled, indeed, is so that they might "seize" or "grasp" the hope that lies before them."¹⁷

The author of Hebrews explains: "If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have the opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city." (Hb. 11:15-16).

In this passage he affirms two things: First, the land that they had gone out of is not good for them anymore, thereby confronting Hebrews's intentions of abandoning their faith and returning to Judaism. Second, that God will honor his promise and already prepared the city because of their perseverance – they preferred to remain as exiles than to return to the old land by having faith in God.

Realizing this we understand how deeply the author of Hebrews relates to his audience's pain and how he offers the assurance that comes from Jesus as their solution. He is saying: "Our people have searched and waited for rest throughout whole history in patience,

¹¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews*, Kindle Edition, The New Testament Library (Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2012).

¹² Beale e Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*.

¹³ Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and the Early Churches*, 331.

¹⁴ Morgan, 341.

¹⁵ Johnson, *Hebrews*.

¹⁶ Johnson.

¹⁷ Johnson.

but now we finally have Christ. He is our city of refuge and sanctuary. You can stop fleeing and start hoping. He is already there, as a forerunner on our behalf. He has made it.”

The author then compares Jesus to Melchizedek, explaining the passage that says God chose Jesus to be a High Priest in the order of Melchizedek. He explains that the “having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.” (Hb. 7:3) appoints to the eternity of Jesus. And that Jesus has become a priest “not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life.” (Hb. 7:16)

He explains how Jesus is “the guarantor of a better covenant” (Hb. 7:22) because “a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness” (Hb. 7:18) and “for when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.” (Hb. 7:12).

In this chapter, the writer of Hebrews presses on the discontinuity tensions that Jesus has brought against their understanding of the law. First, he says that “the law made nothing perfect” (Hb. 7:18), in clear contrast to the perfection of Jesus. But he reminds them that this rupture came from an oath previously made by God in the Scripture (Hb. 7:20-22). He positions God’s oaths even higher than the law: “For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.” (Hb. 7:28) Once again, he is reminding the audience of the continuity of God’s promises and how perfect they are, even greater than the law.

Jesus is a superior High Priest because he “holds his priesthood permanently” (Hb. 7:24), more efficient because “he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him” (Hb. 7:24), perfect because he is “holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above heavens” (Hb. 7:25), and differently from the other high priests, “He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.” (Hb. 7:26).

In the next chapter, the author keeps explaining how Jesus is the guarantor of a better covenant, being “a minister in the holy place, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man.” (Hb. 8:2). He explains that even if Christ was on earth, he would not be like the earthly priests at all, because “they serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things.” (Hb. 8:5). He says the Old Covenant is flawed, obsolete and disappearing. Christ is the perfect and trustful Mediator. He is sufficient and because of that, the law is changed.

Now, imagine how this would be received by a congregation that was at risk of turning back to Judaism. For Western readers today this message can become uninteresting since we have never followed the rituals and sacrifices of the law. But the writer of this letter is destroying the safety of his reader’s dead works to no point of return. He is making them understand once and for all that they can not return to an empty house. Things have changed irrevocably after Jesus, and if they depart from faith, they do it so consciously of the emptiness of their worship. He is superior, thus making him sufficient.

The seriousness of this New Covenant is drawn in chapter nine. He explains how Jesus has entered the Holy Place “not by means of the blood of goats and calves, but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.” (Hb. 9:11-12). He urges the audience to reflect on the superiority of this New Covenant: “How much more will the blood of Christ,

who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” (Hb. 9:14) He once again reminds them that the value of the blood of Christ is what is at stake and its superiority.

Similarly, in chapter 6 the author says that those who have fallen away are “crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.” (Hb. 6:6) Refusing the priesthood of Christ is devaluing his precious blood in all seriousness. (Hb. 6:16). He reminds the audience once again that the blood in the Old Covenant was a copy, and the blood of Jesus is the one that is sufficient. “For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.” (Hb. 9:24)

He ties the priesthood of Christ to hope again, by stating that “Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” (Hb 9:28). It is humorous how he lays this assertion after explaining how the annual sacrifice was not needed anymore. It seems like he is saying, “Yes, Jesus will come again. But not to deal with sin, as you are wondering if dying for it once and for all is now enough. He will return to those who, differently from the deserters of faith, are hopefully waiting for him.” But again, there’s no space for hope without faith.

In Hebrews 10:12-14, the author finishes his explanation on how Jesus is a superior high priest because he has already entered rest. “For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” (Hb. 10:14). The sacrifice of Jesus is superior and, therefore, sufficient.

Now, toward the end of the letter, the author writes about the wonderful things God’s people have done through faith. This passage is both inspiring and empowering. It is meant to show the Hebrews the fruits of faith. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hb. 12:1)

He reminds them that they have faith when they believe that the word of God created the universe, “so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.” (Hb. 11:3). This reminder helps them recollect how they already believe that the process of God’s work can be from invisible to visible.

The chapter explores the faith of great Old Testament figures to encourage the Hebrews in their same adversities. Abraham’s pilgrimage was analyzed earlier. Now he demonstrates how Moses had the faith to choose “being mistreated with the people of God” (Hb. 11:25), which is a great reproach against the fear of being persecuted. Rahab’s faith is also praised because she was not counted amongst the disobedients (Hb. 11:31).

After mentioning many names of some of the greatest Old Testament figures, the author finished with the following remark: “And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God has provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.” (Hb. 11:39). The author laid down the list of these names and warned the readers that they were faithful while waiting for God’s promise, and died in their faith still not receiving.

But now the readers had received what they were waiting for. This “cloud of witness” (Hb. 12:1) points to the One they can see *now*. The author is showing them that by not having faith in Jesus they would dishonor the faith of the patriarchs. His commendation is:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witness, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, *looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith*, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”(Hb. 12:1-2)

Jesus is “*the founder and perfecter of our faith.*” (Hb. 12:2). In this declaration, the writer reminds the audience that Jesus is the author of the faith from their ancestors. Jesus is the founder. But not only the founder, he is the perfecter. He is the *τελειωτής*: the one who finishes our faith bringing it up to perfection. The beginning and the end.

In the departing chapter, the author sums up the greatest points of his sermon-letter. First, there is the following advice: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.” (Hb. 13:7) While one can interpret the leaders to be the ones they lived with, from the context of the whole letter, it seems more plausible that this time he is referring to the “cloud of witnesses” and the patriarchs.

Once again, he insists on how the sacrifice was “once and for all”, and that they should be partakers in Christ’s suffering and reproach. (Hb. 13:12-13). He reaffirms that “here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” (Hb. 13), reminding them once again about the need to wait patiently and in faith. And that the “sacrifice of praise”, which is “the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name” (Hb 13:15) must be *continually* given, once more detailing how faith must be seen at all times. Other sacrifices in the eyes of the Lord are: doing good, sharing, and obeying leaders happily. (Hb. 13:17)

After analyzing how the author of Hebrews used the Old Testament and the faith of the Patriarchs to affirm the sufficiency of Christ’s assurance that comes from his superiority, we now head towards the notion of salvation and faith, especially in the warning passages.

Faith, Salvation, and Apostasy

In the first part of the present essay the allusions and echoes from the Old Testament were discussed. They are the core of the writer’s conviction and an ongoing argument from the beginning to the end of the book. Now, in order to analyze the author’s approach to salvation, they must be kept in mind. Understanding the warning passages is only possible in light of the whole book of Hebrews.

The Role of Faith in Salvation

The author refers to faith in a conditional way throughout the letter, not only grammatically but historically. He implicates at least a cause-effect relationship between perseverance and salvation through faith.

In Hebrews 3:6, he uses the conjunction *ἐὰν*: “And we are his house *if* indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.” (Hb. 3:6). In Hebrews 3:14 he uses the same conjunction again, in the key verse of the letter: “For we have come to share in Christ, *if* indeed we hold our original confidence firm *to the end*.” Once more, he stresses that faith must be kept to the end: “And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope *until the end*.” (Hb 6:11)

The endurance of faith is an inevitable requisite for receiving the promise: “For you have need of endurance, so that *when you have done the will of God you may receive* what is promised.” (Hb. 10:36) Faith is also the condition to please and draw near to God: “And without faith it is *impossible* to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” (Hb 11:6)

He recollects the reason why the Israelites did not enter rest: “So we see that they were unable to enter rest *because of unbelief*.” (Hb. 3:19) They had the chance to enter rest, but they did not. Why? “For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they *were not united by faith* with those who listened.” (Hb. 4:2)

On the other hand, he praises those who have received the promise through patience and endurance of their faith as role models: “So that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promise.” (Hb.6:12) Abraham obtained his promise “having patiently waited” (Hb. 6:15), and the cloud of witnesses in Hebrews 11 also persevered in faith.

This brings us to two affirmations regarding faith in Hebrews: First, *salvation is conditioned to faith*. Receiving the promise, rest, and forgiveness in Hebrews is amalgamated with having faith in Jesus Christ.

Second, *faith happens in the realm of time*. This means that the present faith needs to persevere in order to be fully effective. That is the reason why the debacle on Hebrews should not primarily be “loss of salvation”, but “loss of faith”, even if one thing leads to another. The question answered in Hebrews is not “How can I be saved?” but “Why do I need to have a steadfast faith in Jesus?”.

The author of Hebrews develops the idea of a time-bound faith throughout the letter not only when he warns them about persevering to the end, but also when talking about *today*. We have seen the importance of persevering. Now what does the insistence of the writer on the present time and the word “today” indicate? And how does it impact their notion of faith? This will be analyzed when the author first introduces this theme, in the second warning passage of the letter.

The Warning Passages

According to Scot McKnight, there are five warning passages in the book of Hebrews. The first is in Hebrews 2:1-4. The second one is in Hebrews 3:7 to 4:13. The third is in Hebrews 5:11 to 6:12. The fourth is in Hebrews 10:19-39. And the fifth and last warning

passage is in Hebrews 12:1-29.¹⁸ McKnight categorizes elements that are common in each of the warning passages:

The warning passages in Hebrews share a common form: each has four elements or components. In each warning passage we find: (1) the *subjects* or *audience* who are either committing or in danger of committing, (2) the *sin* that leads to (3) the *exhortation* which, if not followed, leads to (4) the *consequences* of that sin.¹⁹

McKnight's approach to interpreting the warning passages is creating "a synthesis of each component as revealed in each warning passage" to provide "clarity on the meaning of a given component in a single passage".²⁰ However, this present essay will not follow the same approach. To uncover the content of each warning passage, the motifs and hooks from the previous chapters in the letter will be brought into consideration, in an attempt to search for the author's integral message. It is noticeable how the writer created a rhythm of teaching and exhortation throughout the entire letter, and breaking this rhythm might leave missing pieces in the puzzle. Nonetheless, as each warning passage is analyzed, we can see how they stack on top of each other, completing themselves.

The *first* warning passage is Hebrews 2:1-4. In every warning, the writer encapsulates the message he has been teaching and uses the parallels from the Old Testament he has been drawing. This warning follows the superiority of Jesus over angels.

There are *two* important aspects of this warning. First, *the audience is placed as hearers of the Good News*, and this position demands a reaction from them. The writer introduces them to their religious history. Now he is not simply recollecting Old Testament passages, he is transitioning them for the audience today. They received the message in great ways – from God, angels, signs and wonders, and witnesses. Yet, they need to be warned against drifting away from it. The key verb in this chapter is *neglect*.

What does neglect mean? The Greek word *ἀμελέω* indicates a disregard towards something, a lack of importance. The same word is used by God in Hebrews 8:9 when He says: "For they did not continue in my covenant, and so *I showed no concern* for them, declares the Lord." (Hb. 8:9). The author hints that "every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution" (Hb. 2:2). And to those who are unfaithful and neglect the Gospel, God will show no concern to them.

This relates to the second important aspect, which is how the author communicates the consequences of this neglect. Besides drawing from God's oath, he does so by also reminding them of the superiority of Christ: "How shall we escape if we neglect such a *great* salvation?" (Hb. 2:3). Christ is worthy, therefore neglecting him is a great sin. In the following chapters, he keeps building on the cosmic war and Christ's hierarchy.

¹⁸ Scot McKnight, "The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions", *Trinity Journal* 13NS (1992): 21–59.

¹⁹ McKnight, 25.

²⁰ McKnight, 26.

In the *second* warning passage, Hebrews 3:7 to 4:13, the concept of *today's faith* is first now incorporated. This warning is woven within the fabric of the superiority of Jesus over Moses. The argument from authority is drawn from the Old Testament text Psalms 95, and the scenario is the rest that they did not enter due to unbelief. From this passage we have the key verse of Hebrews: "For we have to come to share in Christ, *if* indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end." (Hb. 3:14).

There are three very important topics in this passage. First, *the Old Testament background and its continuity*. He introduced the superiority of Jesus in the latter verses, and is once again drawing from the Scriptures to urge the audience: do not fall in their same sins because the promise of rest is still valid.

He quotes an oath made by God, from the Old Testament, leaning on the continuity and God's eternal character: "As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest'" (Hb. 3:11). The author reminds the readers that even under Moses, there were some who rebelled. They had provoked God and their bodies "fell in the wilderness" (Hb. 3:17). He then concludes that "they were unable to enter because of unbelief." (Hb 3:19) and reiterates that "the promise of entering his rest still stands." (Hb. 4:1).

Then, he attributes this continuity to God's patience: "Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he appoints a certain day, "Today", saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted." (Hb. 4:6-7) Finally, he reinforces the sovereignty of God's oaths and how the promise he quoted is still valid to them in the final part of the warning: "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Hb. 4:12)

The second aspect is *the failure of the people of God to enter rest*. The author explains that they did not enter because they were "*dispersuaded*" (*ἀπειθειαν*). The people have "hardened their hearts as in the rebellion" (Hb. 3:7), "gone astray" (Hb. 4:10), "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Hb. 3:13), "were not united by faith" (Hb. 4:2), and were "disobedient (*dispersuaded*)" (Hb. 4:6). From this warning passage we can conclude two things: the Hebrews are being compared to the people in the wilderness who had heard God's promises of entering rest; and they are being warned against the same sin that prevented the people from entering rest, which is not only unbelief but unfaithfulness.²¹

Third, is *the aspect of time*. This passage elaborates on God's oath. This oath describes a sequence of events that occur in the realm of time. The process of entering salvation is complete in the time of Moses because it is in the past and we know their failure to enter God's rest and the reason why they did not enter. But God's warning for the Hebrews is happening in the present time, or "*today*".

The following chain of events is happening: there is a promise to enter rest that was made by God in the past. There is the hearing of the Lord's call happening today. In reaction to that call, still today, there are two responses: disobedience and rebellion; or persevering in faith. The future comprehends the moment of rest. This means that while we can hear and respond to God's call, and while we have not entered rest, we still are in "*today*".

²¹ "Rather than "unbelief," then, *apistia* here means the "faithlessness" that is the opposite of "faithfulness"; compare especially Paul in Rom 3:3; 4:20; 11:20, 23. It was not the failure of the Israelites to believe in God that prevented their entry, but their failure in loyalty and obedience." [Johnson, Hebrews, 217.](#)

For the writer of Hebrews, keeping your faith today is a requisite for entering rest in the future. And when is today? Is it the day they hear the Lord's promise? No. Today is every day that happens before rest and after hearing the Lord. As supported by L. T. Johnson, "Both uses of *sēmeron* in the Psalms suggest a sense of continuing and open-ended revelation by God: God speaks "today" (cf. Heb 1:1)."²²

This leads us to the problem of losing faith. In this warning, the author calls the process of losing faith as "rebellion", "*dispersuasion*", and "hardening of the heart". And he warns readers: "Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience." (Hb. 4:11). Bird and Wright explain their position regarding the role of today's faith and future salvation:

However, I would point out that in Hebrews salvation is essentially future! See Hebrews 1.4; 2.3; 5.9; 6.9; and 9.28. You cannot lose what you do not fully have! This explains why the author still expects the audience to persevere (see Heb. 6.9 and 10.39). I think the main point is that members of the Christian community as a whole should make sure that it does not become a place where God's grace can be received in vain by anyone (see Heb. 12.15).²³

The *third* warning passage is in Hebrews 5:11-6:12. This passage is a stop in the writer's argument because he wanted to exhort the readers in their "dull hearing." (Hb. 5:11). They should know better at that point. The Old Testament background on this passage was analyzed previously. Nonetheless, there are important points in this warning passage that must be discussed now.

First, *how deeply faith and salvation are tied to the Old Testament in this particular warning passage*. The author is trying to persuade the readers to the realization that the house they are trying to come back to is now empty because they forgot the basis of their faith, and he has now to keep "laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God" (Hb. 6:1) Not only that but even ceremonial instructions (Hb. 6:2). He is saying, "I should not need to explain the most basic things of our faith once again." What is interesting here is how the author deals with the revelation from the Gospel as so intertwined in their history, that the one who doubts it is fairly distant from their own religious background.

It is in this context, that one of the most well-discussed verses of the New Testament regarding assurance of salvation appears:

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then fallen away,

²² Johnson, *Hebrews*, 217.

²³ Wright e Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians*.

to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. (Hb. 6:4-6)

There are many approaches as to what those verses meant for the readers at that time and what it would mean for Christians today, but the second answer can not come without the first. McKnight departs his interpretation of this passage as being written directly about Hebrews readers, joining the debate of their full or partial conversion. He argues that this passage refers directly to them, who were fully converted: “From this expression we may argue reasonably that the readers were those who had experienced the grace of God; to put differently, they were at the phenomenological level converts to Jesus Christ.”²⁴

The discussion of whether or not the writers were writing to fully converts can not blur the understanding that the writer is drawing an analogy to his readers. The author of Hebrews has been talking in the Old Testament language since the beginning of the book, and his entire argument is drawn from their religious roots. Interpretations of this hard passage that ignore this step might cause the reader to start jumping to conclusions too quickly. Does that mean it does not apply to present readers? No. He is drawing this analogy for this reason – to apply it to his present readers, who were a part of the New Covenant like we are today.

G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson approach this passage by agreeing with Mathewson that it is heavily dependent on Old Testament references, with lots of allusions and echoes. Every description is related to those who were in the wilderness with Moses and failed to enter rest and continues the motif from the last warning passage. The “enlightenment” echoes the pillar of fire that “enlightened” the Israelites in their journey. The “heavenly gift” that was tasted echoes the manna that fell from heaven and sustained people in the wilderness. Those who had “become companions to the Holy Spirit” echo the interactions that the people in the wilderness had with the Spirit of God.²⁵ His conclusion summarizes how densely the writer of Hebrews is associated with the Old Testament, making it harder to interpret the letter without considering it with no loss to its content.

Having considered the elements describing the fallen in Heb. 6:4–6, Mathewson (1999:223) concludes, “The author is not just alluding to snippets of texts and isolated vocabulary for rhetorical color, but by alluding to texts which belong to a larger matrix of ideas he is evoking the entire context and story of Israel’s experience in the wilderness.” Thus, the author of Hebrews utilizes the language of the OT to *describe a particularly grievous abandonment of the Christian community in his day and to craft a stern warning to those who would turn their backs on Christ and his church*. Moreover, the warning harks back to the earlier hortatory section on those who fell in the wilderness (3:7–4:2), who heard the good news preached but did not profit by it (4:2).

Another illustration is drawn by the writer. Johnson asserts how it still contains an Old Testament analogy: “The language of “thorns and thistles” is reminiscent of Gen 3:12–18,

²⁴ McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions”.

²⁵ Beale e Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*.

where God curses the earth because of human sin. The use of “blessing” and “curse,” in turn, reminds us of Deuteronomy, where God sets before the people “the blessing and the curse” (30:1).²⁶ But this analogy can also be traced to the Parable of the Sower preached by Jesus. In this case, both lands receive rain, but one produces a bountiful crop, and the other produces thorns and thistles. The justice character of God is shown when He destroys the latter.

But the author of Hebrews makes sure to explain that at least the majority of his readers, the ones he has been discipling, have been showing good fruits from their faith (Hb. 6:9-10). His concern was for their perseverance, since some had left them, and others were starting to doubt. For that reason, the call is to imitate those who persevere, not those who left. (Hb. 6:12) Carson explains how this conduct can be categorized as apostasy: “Therefore any who taste of its fruit, recognize its origin, ally themselves with its significance, and then deliberately reject this gospel, have no place left to turn: there is no more forgiveness of sins. This is apostasy: it is turning away from a religious position and stance once firmly held.”²⁷

Peterson highlights how Scot McKnight has failed to factor in the pastoral aspect of the warning passages, therefore omitting the most important evidence unfavorable to his argument. For Peterson, the confidence that the writer of Hebrews shows in his audience further proves how they are converts. He writes: “God does preserve true believers to the end; those threatened with hellfire are professors who by committing apostasy show that they possess inadequate faith.”²⁸

The *fourth* warning passage, in Hebrews 10:19-39, comes after the message of Christ’s superior sacrifice. The author reaches the peak of his argumentation when comparing the covenants and stating that the New Covenant is superior because of how precious Jesus’ sacrifice is. Jesus is the guarantor of a faultless covenant.

It is precisely in that light that the author writes this warning passage. After thoroughly exposing them to the supremacy of Christ, they must have a high response to the message of the Gospel. Jesus, who is better than the angels, Moses, and Melchizedek, in the superiority of his threefold office, is the guarantor of this covenant. And what does that change for them and for their religious life?

There are *three* important aspects in this passage. First, *there is only one way to approach the throne of grace and it is through Jesus*. The author invites them to enter the throne of grace “with a true heart in full assurance of faith” and holding “fast the confession of hope without wavering.” (Hb. 10:22-23). This is the position of someone who trusts in the faithfulness of Christ. Calvin writes on how this full assurance in Jesus reflects our faith: “By the term full assurance, *πληροφορία* the Apostle points out the nature of faith, and at the same time reminds us, that the grace of Christ cannot be received except by those who possess a fixed and unhesitating conviction.”²⁹

Second, *the eternal character of God and his promises still stand*. Once again, the author affirms that they know God’s faithfulness and how he honors his words: “For we

²⁶ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 298.

²⁷ Carson, “Reflections on Christian Assurance”, 267.

²⁸ Robert A. Peterson, *Our secure salvation: preservation and apostasy* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 175.

²⁹ Calvin, *John Calvin’s Commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews*.

know him who said, ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay.’ And again, ‘The Lord will judge his people.’ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Hb. 10:30-31)

Third, *the consequences of unbelief will be worse for those who reject Christ than the Old Covenant consequences due to his superiority.* Here, another heavily debated passage on salvation appears:

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, *there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.* Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Hb. 10:26-31)

The affirmation that “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” (Hb. 10:26-27) is in dialogue with the shocking affirmation that “it is impossible (...) to restore them again to repentance they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.” (Hb. 6:1-6).

In both of these passages, the author is conveying the message that apart from Jesus there is no repentance. If some people were considering going back to living by the Old Covenant, the author shows that there is no repentance for them and no sacrifice left to be performed.

First, because what could you possibly repent outside of Christ? Are they willing to return to a religious practice that is now void because the work is finished by Christ and there is a change in dispensations? Their ancestors were announcing Christ’s crucifixion in each sacrifice, and because of their faith in the Ultimate Sacrifice, and obedience to God’s Law, they offered them and were forgiven. If they keep performing sacrifices today, after the resurrection of Christ, where does their forgiveness come from? Ignoring Jesus and keeping old rituals is like crucifying him again because it ignores its completion. It is calling for something that is already done. It is a mockery. The author clarifies that for those people who are returning to Judaism after knowing Christ, not only there is no forgiveness of sin, but terrible judgment. As Hughes writes, “The ignorant cannot commit this sin. It cannot be committed inadvertently. It is a sin only ‘church people’ can commit. For such, ‘there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins’ because they have rejected the one and only valid sacrifice—Christ.”³⁰

And if even in the time of the Law the consequences for sins were harsh, how much more are they for those who “who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned

³⁰ R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews : An Anchor for the Soul.* (Crossway, 2015).

the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?" (Hb. 10:29)

In the end, he encourages his readers: "But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls." (Hb. 10:39) This affirmation implies that there are some people who non-hypothetically have turned back from Jesus.

All of the warnings are intended to assure them of what they have to gain from staying in Christ. De Silva analyzes how the language used and the New Testament context might even relate to the patron-client relationships, with Jesus being the Patron and the Broker: "Statements about the impossibility of being brought back into the sphere of grace – that is, back into a patron-client bond with God through Jesus – serve the purpose of motivation the addresses to persevere in trust and obedience, so as to continue to enjoy God's beneficence and, at the last, the enjoy the greatest fist of a place in the heavenly, eternal realm."³¹

The *fifth* and last warning passage is Hebrews 12:1-29. There are *four* aspects in this passage that enlighten our comprehension of the writer's understanding of faith.

First, *Jesus is the founder and perfecter of our faith*. This declaration beautifully constructs how Jesus is the beginning of their faith, tying back to the Old Covenant, and perfecter of their faith, stating how they needed him in the present, so their faith would become greater. The diminishing of their faith could only happen outside Christ.

Second, *the hostility they were enduring is God's discipline*. The writer highlights the endurance and obedience of Jesus, and of the cloud of witness, to reassure the readers that the persecution they might face is not God's punishment, but discipline. It would make their faith grow in patience and endurance.

Third, *there is a time for repentance*. The aspect of time is once again considered and brought to attention by the author. He uses the example of Esau, who lost his birthright due to his unholiness: "For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought with tears." (Hb. 12:16-17). The parallels with Esau reinforce this idea of disregarding the value of their spiritual inheritance.

Fourth, *the annunciation of a good and better kingdom*. Here, the author paints a beautiful scene as to the superiority of Christ's reception of believers, and how they are welcomed with love and not fear:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Hb. 10:22-24)

³¹ D. A. DeSilva, *Exchanging Favor for Wrath : Apostasy in Hebrews and Patron-Client Relationships*, 115 (Journal of Biblical Literature, 1996).

Right after this image, he warns: “See that you do not refuse him who is speaking.” (Hb. 10:25). But the great image of God’s manifestations in the Old Covenant that draw fear even of Moses, is amplified for the future. God will once again shake everything “in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.” (Hb. 10:27). The only response to that is not fear, but worship and endurance until the end. Beale and Carson summarize the call for response:

If the world is going to experience such a dramatic change, one needs to be ready for that change. The way to be ready is to be in right relationship to Jesus, for he is the one who laid the earth’s foundations in the beginning and who, in contrast to the creation, which grows old and will be packed away by Christ himself, will remain (1:10–12). Thus, he and his kingdom, and those who are of the kingdom, transcend the present state of the created order. Those who are of the world will perish with it at its shaking when Christ returns.³²

From the analysis of each warning passage we reach the following conclusions: 1) The author places the reading in *today*, bringing awareness to their lifestyle at the present moment, as reflecting the health of their faith, 2) The author is concerned that they might abandon Christ to return to their Old Covenantal religious practices, 3) There is no repentance for their sins outside Christ, 4) Salvation is future but God is faithful to retribute their present time endurance, and 5) There is no faith without Jesus and without faith there is no salvation.

Christ’s Loving Assurance

The writer of Hebrews did not compose the warning passages to question people’s faith. He is warning them against a process that they might get caught if they are not assured of their faith in Christ. There were those who heard God’s voice, hardened their hearts, and rebelled against God in the Old Testament, and others whose faith and endurance pleased God. But what is happening in both processes? Are people at risk of losing their salvation? There are four theological views on this topic: hypothetical view, phenomenological-false believer view, phenomenological-true believer view, and communal view.³³

Another aspect of Hebrews should be taken into consideration before considering this tension on salvation views, and it is the writer’s view on assurance. The matter of assurance is important because it is what triumphs over lack of faith. For the author of Hebrews, Christ’s assurance is superior to the Old Covenant because of its perfection.

According to Carson, assurance is “a Christian believer’s confidence that he is already in a right standing with God and that this will issue in ultimate salvation.”³⁴ The audience in Hebrews was having a deep problem with their assurance in Christ, and at risk of going back to the religious practice of offering sacrifices for their sins. The writer of the letter deals with this issue by showing that *the superiority of Jesus springs a better assurance*: “For instance, the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of the boldness Christians enjoy in coming before God,

³²Beale e Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*.

³³ McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions”.

³⁴ Carson, “Reflections on Christian Assurance”, 248.

now that their high priest has entered into the heavenly tabernacle to intercede on their behalf.”³⁵ Assurance in Hebrews is the remedy of unbelief, and the lack of assurance is like holes in the boat of Christian life. Carson explains how differently assurance from the New Testament operates than the Old Testament:

The point to be observed is that these Old Testament promises foresee a time when *God's law is written on the heart of his people*. Teachers will no longer say, “Know the Lord”, for they will all know him (Jer. 31): the outlook is not of a time when there will be no teachers, but *no mediating teachers*, no *mediators*, whose very office endures them that they have an endowment not enjoyed by others. The new covenant will not be like the tribal covenant associated with Moses' name, when the fathers ate sour grapes and their children's teeth were set on edge. Rather, it is characterized by the removal of the heart of stone among all of God's covenantal people. To use the language of Ezekiel 36, the new covenant will be characterized by cleansing (sprinkling with water) and spiritual renewal (a new heart and a new spirit).³⁶

The twofold characterization of the New Covenantal salvation noticed by Carson can be seen in Hebrews 8, when the writer reminds the audience of the promise in Jeremiah 31, quoting the chapter. Carson observes how neglecting this twofold aspect may damage the interpretation of the theme of assurance: “It appears that a great deal of the debate over assurance has been controlled by forensic categories associated with justification and faith, but has largely ignores the categories of power and transformation associated with the Spirit and new covenant.”³⁷ He argues that although these are two different aspects, they are inseparable: “A fundamental component of such themes is that the people of the new covenant are by definition granted a new heart and empowered by the Spirit to walk in holiness, to love righteousness, to prove pleasing the Lord.”³⁸ Even though a Christian is not promised to never sin anymore, “every single instance of sin is shocking, inexcusable, forbidden, appalling and out of line with what we are as Christians.”³⁹ This is precisely the Hebrews' crisis: they did not mature the word in their hearts, yet still needed to be taught (Hb 5:11-12).

Therefore, according to Carson, it is possible to admit that conduct and assurance are tied together, even if not being the way of salvation: “This at least raises the possibility that some forms of Christian assurance might be validly based on observable transformed conduct, without in any way suggesting that such conduct wins or earns and gains salvation.”⁴⁰ The Westminster Confession of Faith writes how assurance can bring fruits: “And therefore it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure; that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness *in the duties of obedience, the proper*

³⁵ Carson, 298.

³⁶ Carson, 258.

³⁷ Carson, 258.

³⁸ Carson, 258.

³⁹ Carson, 259.

⁴⁰ Carson, 259.

fruits of this assurance: so far is it from inclining men to looseness.”⁴¹ Preaching on Apostasy and Hebrews 6, John Owen on a brighter side, shows how the Beauty of Christ Assurance is needed *intra nos* against apostasy:

Do not, therefore, suppose that you have learned anything of God in Christ, of the mystery of his grace, of his acceptable and perfect will, *unless you see therein such evidence* of infinite wisdom, goodness, holiness, love, in all things so suited unto the eternal glory of God and advantage of your own souls, in the uttermost rest, peace, and satisfaction that they are capable of, as that you may admire, adore, delight in them, and cleave unto them with a holy, prevalent, unconquerable love.⁴²

Carson admits that “several New Testament writers recognize the existence of spurious or transitory faith, and this recognition must be factored into any responsible doctrine of Christian assurance.”⁴³ How does this relate to the process of faith in Hebrews? He argues that in this matter, the nature of apostasy contrasts with the believer’s assurance. Notably, the book of Hebrews is “the *locus classicus* of the subject of apostasy in the New Testament.”⁴⁴ For Carson, the working definition of apostasy is “the decisive turning away from a religious position or belief.”⁴⁵ Hughes exemplifies instances of apostasy as a complete disdain of Jesus: an attack on Christ’s work and rejection not only of the person and work of Christ. but also the person and work of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁶ Some include Judas not in this transitory faith state nor apostate, but as an example of the type of people which the warning passages in Hebrews are referring to: the phenomenological-false believer. Kistemaker writes on this view:

The author begins this section with the word ‘impossible,’ which states an absolute fact that cannot be changed. It relates, for example, to the inability of Judas Iscariot, who, for betraying Jesus, cannot be saved. (...) It simply demonstrates that an individual can seem to be a Christian, and even participate in the blessings of the covenant community, and yet later prove to be an unbeliever.⁴⁷

Carson does not agree with the view that the case of Judas applies as an example of apostasy for the warning passages, due to the particular different experiences in coming to faith by people in the Gospels: “But if the first disciples’ coming to faith was not exactly like ours, then Judas Iscariot’s apostasy from whatever level he had attained before the crucifixion was not exactly like apostasy in Hebrews 6 or 10.”⁴⁸ But also, the impossibility in which the author of Hebrews is referring to is not directed simply towards the election of a subject, as if someone is inherently “*unsavable*” like Judas.

⁴¹ Westminster Assembly, “The Westminster Confession of Faith”, *Ligonier* (blog), 1646, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/westminster-confession-faith>.

⁴² Joe Owen, *The Nature of Apostasy* (West Linn, OK: Monergism Books, 2011), 149.

⁴³ Carson, “Reflections on Christian Assurance”, 260.

⁴⁴ *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, Kindle Edition, (The IVP Bible Dictionary Series) (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997), 73–75.

⁴⁵ Carson, “Reflections on Christian Assurance”, 260.

⁴⁶ Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul*.

⁴⁷ Kistemaker e Kruger, “Hebrews”, 422.

⁴⁸ Carson, “Reflections on Christian Assurance”, 260.

The impossibility within these warnings lies in the means that a person is trying to reach salvation, which in the case of the Hebrews, was by going back to Judaism. On the subject, Calvin also declares that Jesus is the only basis of assurance (*Institutas*, III, XXV, V): “Christ the foundation of this calling and election. He who does not lean on him alone cannot be certain of his election. He is the faithful interpreter of the eternal counsel in regard to our salvation.”⁴⁹ There is no election apart from Christ.

What does the understanding of assurance in the book of Hebrews add to its concept of faith? For Carson, it builds to the understanding of two types of faith: “In other words, genuine faith, by definition, perseveres; where there is no perseverance by definition the faith cannot be genuine. (...) Genuine faith is tied to perseverance; transitory faith is spurious.”⁵⁰ Adding the dimension of time can change the discussion around faith.

At this point, we should consider how the Apostle John also “presupposes that spurious faith is possible, but the genuine faith, by definition, perseveres.”⁵¹ when dealing with those who were conducting themselves as Christians initially, but later abandoned their faith. In the epistle, the apostle writes: “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.” (1 John 2:19)

The apostle John acknowledges how the aspect of time presented to them a spurious faith, even if in the beginning they were “from them”. But he only affirmed the ingenuine aspect of their faith in its specific case *after* their abandonment. While John is speaking retroactively, the writer of Hebrews is speaking about the present time, or “today”. The author of Hebrews wants to strengthen their faith and make them aware of the deceitfulness of sin so they don’t abandon their faith in Jesus. He acknowledges that the unfolding of time reveals God’s decrees: “Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he appoints a certain day, ‘Today’” (Hb. 4:6-7)

William Lane Craig deems the warning passages as incompatible with the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. If true believers are incapable of apostasy, the warnings are needless. And if they must be warned to not fall into apostasy, this proves that believers are capable of falling away. This argument exemplifies how alienating the realm of time can trouble the perception of God’s eternal decrees.⁵²

First, the author of Hebrews does not count the warnings as news. He quotes from the Old Testament prophecies to stress the continuity of the reader’s faith. He also clearly declares that God’s works “have been finished since the creation of the world” (Hb. 4:2) and God already knows those who will enter his rest (Hb. 4:6). God’s prescience is acknowledged as unchanging. Second, the author of Hebrews writes with the intent of rooting them in assurance. He has observed how faithful their works have been despite their crisis of faith. Third, the author of Hebrews multiple times speaks regarding the present time – or “today”, and this speaks on the nature of the warnings. He is dealing with the pastoral issue of having people with transitory faith leaving the community and the way that true faith is only acknowledged on the basis of their perseverance in faith.

⁴⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Kindle Edition (V Solas Press, 2021), 1114.

⁵⁰ Carson, “Reflections on Christian Assurance”, 264.

⁵¹ Carson, 265.

⁵² William Lane Craig, “‘Lest anyone should fall’: A middle knowledge perspective on perseverance and apostolic warnings”, *Philosophy of Religion*, 9, n° 29 (1991): 65–74.

The same reasoning that Craig brings to the interpretation of this text can be used in the fallacy that a believer's conduct does not matter if they are already saved and elect. In fact, this is the core of Craig's argument. No responsible Christian will defend the idea of living in sin due to their election, for it is the Christian's life, persevering in faith, that attests to his election. This is how the writer of Hebrews relates to his readers – by approving and encouraging them to continue their works of faith. On warnings and admonitions, Wayne Grudem explains, “The purpose is always to warn those who are thinking of falling away or have fallen away that if they do this it is a strong indication that they were never saved in the first place.”⁵³ Especially because no man can tell whether the received seed will root or weather. As Schreiner writes: “It is not the reception of the word but the duration of faith that signals genuineness. Failure to persevere uncovers belief to be temporary, inadequate, and insincere. Perseverance that yields fruit confirms faith's authenticity.”⁵⁴

Therefore, we can conclude that: 1) Faith and time are related in human experience, 2) In our time, the process of faith comes before salvation, for it is clear in Hebrews that salvation comes from a *tested* faith, 3) When speaking to a community of faith, recognizing genuine believers can only be possible by observing their conduct regarding their perseverance in faith, not sinlessness; and 4) The role of the preacher is to exhort the congregation to reach the fulness of their faith in Jesus, and reject the nature of a transitory faith, being approved in this test by the power of the Holy Spirit.

For this reason, instead of arguing for one of the sides that agree that the warning passages were either a merely hypothetical situation, or regarding the actual risk of real Christians losing their salvation, some considerations must be made in order to add a dimension to this discussion: 1) True believers persevere in their faith, according to Hebrews, 2) Hebrews allows transitory faith, like the soil that receives good seed but produces bad fruit, and 3) Perseverance can only be achieved through Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.⁵⁵

Would the warning of Hebrews prove that it is possible for a Christian to be considered saved at first, and then to lose their salvation? According to our present exposition of Hebrews, the only way to be saved is through a persevering faith in Jesus Christ, and this perseverance can only be testified throughout the course of their lives. Nonetheless, perseverance in faith is not a condition for salvation, but “the mark of those who are saved”.⁵⁶ The person who abandons their faith in Christ clearly does not have a genuine faith, and therefore will not be saved. That is the reason why responding “today” is important: faith manifests itself throughout time. Therefore, we can only understand salvation in the realm of time, and as Carson wisely writes, “We do not know how an eternal God operates in time.”⁵⁷

⁵³ Wayne Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study of Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Other Warning Passages in Hebrews”, em *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 176.

⁵⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology Of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 221.

⁵⁵ “Failure to persevere serves to undermine assurance. The basis of assurance is Christ and his work and its entailments.” Carson, 276.

⁵⁶ Compton, “Persevering and Falling Away: A Reexamination of Hebrews 6:4-6”.

⁵⁷ Carson, “Reflections on Christian Assurance”, 271.

Encouraging Others Against Apostasy As Longs As It Is Called Today

Hebrews is a sermon-letter that shows how discipline and true love operate against upcoming evil and destruction. It is a hard pastoral task to approach the subjects the author is dealing with in this letter. Yet, the mastery of the author of Hebrews is in the way he both gracefully assures their salvation in Christ and exhorts them to be apart from evil. One of the most repeated recommendations from the author against apostasy is Christian communal encouragement and an ecclesiological union in Christ. Along with remembering Christ's loving assurance, mutual encouragement is a great remedy to keep the community of faith healthy.

The writer exposes how without faith there is no unity: "For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they *were not united by faith* with those who listened." (Hb. 4:2) In the New Covenant, we "have come to share in Christ." (Hb 3:14) He writes the first passage after asking them to exhort each other, indicating that by mutual encouragement we are united in faith: "Take care brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. *But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.*" (Hb. 3:12)

The author of Hebrews also encourages the audience in the midst of his warning passages: "For God is not unjust as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises." (Hb. 6:12-13)

He also recommends earnestly that they do not neglect meeting each other and keep showing love in their community, indicating that neglecting it might open up spaces for losing faith: "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." (Hb 10:24-25)

The church of the Hebrews was strong in showing their love through works, and he encouraged them to keep doing so. "Let brotherly love continue." (Hb 13:1) Throughout the letter, the loving encouragement within a community of faith would act as a constant repellent of apostasy.

The Apostolic Church received encouragements in each letters to keep knowing and showing the love of God. Ephesians 3:14-21 is an extraordinary passage, possibly expressing the conclusion of Paul's prayer begun in Ephesians 1:17-23, that each Christian might be given the power to deeply and wholeheartedly know the incredible love of God. In the heart of his prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21, Paul articulates a profound desire for the believers to be rooted and established in love, able to comprehend the full dimensions of Christ's love and filled with the fullness of God. This prayer resonates deeply with the themes explored in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where the sufficiency of Christ's loving assurance is highlighted as the cornerstone for faith and resistance against apostasy.

Just as Paul seeks for the Ephesians to gain strength through the Spirit and Christ's indwelling, Hebrews emphasizes the necessity of holding fast to our faith in Christ's priestly mediation and his perfect sacrifice. The assurance offered by Christ in Hebrews, similar to

the spiritual empowerment described by Paul, equips believers to maintain their confession of faith amidst trials and challenges, reinforcing the communal and individual need for spiritual fortitude derived from an unshakeable understanding of divine love.

Paul also underscores the communal aspect of faith, urging believers to encourage and support one another in their spiritual journeys. Hebrews calls for mutual encouragement "as long as it is called Today," aligning with Paul's vision of a church united in love and strengthened by a collective grasp of Christ's vast and enduring love. This unity and mutual edification are vital for preventing the spiritual drift that Hebrews warns against, serving as a safeguard against the isolation that can lead to apostasy. Paul's emphasis on comprehending Christ's love together with all the saints mirrors the exhortative tone of Hebrews, which not only counsels against neglecting to meet together but promotes a continuous, shared engagement with faith. In this way, both passages advocate for a vibrant, interconnected faith community that thrives on the profound, transformative assurance found in Christ—a theme that is both timeless and crucial for the Church's perseverance and growth.

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. *I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.* And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen. (Eph. 3:14-21)

When Paul requests that, he has a corollary request in mind: "Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him" (Eph. 3:17). This statement comes as another layer of being empowered by the Spirit: having Christ residing permanently in our hearts. For Paul, faith is not a momentary state but *perseveres*. Faith is not supposed to vanish after hearing the Gospel, but to change everything in our lives. So, to have Christ dwelling in our hearts is about also having "his controlling presence over our attitudes and conduct as we continually trust him."⁵⁸ Paul isn't exhorting them for Christ's absence in their heart, for they already received Him when they were saved. As Thielman points out: "What they apparently lack is the inner strength and encouragement they should draw from these truths."⁵⁹

The consequence of trusting in Christ is "being rooted and established in love" (Eph. 3:17). Being grounded and rooted in God's love is a part of this indwelling of Christ in our hearts through the Spirit that changes our whole reality. For Bock and Perrin, this is the basis of our new self: "Our identity and security come from grasping the depth of God's love for us and drawing on it for *spiritual solidity*."⁶⁰ This is a good diagnosis for the church of Hebrews: their identities were under attack because of their lack of faith and assurance. According to Bock and Perrin, the Apostle Paul relied on faith to create spiritual solidity, or maturity. What

⁵⁸ Carson, *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*, 8819.

⁵⁹ Frank Thielman, *Ephesians (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)* (Baker, 2010), 231.

⁶⁰ Bock and Perrin, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 109

gives stability to a believer is his assurance in faith, the relational aspect that roots him in God's love.

Paul's prayer to the Ephesians shows how the power of the Spirit strengthens believers in our inner being, and for that reason, Christ dwells in our hearts, through faith. Our perseverance is completely dependent on the power of the Holy Spirit, which we might humbly ask and receive for. The Apostle also ties this loving assurance to communion with the Lord's holy people. May we be *rooted* and *established* in love with the power to receive the revelation of Christ's perfect and superior love *today*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to provide practical applications for using what has been said in this essay to help myself and others correct misconceptions of God and his desired relationship with us to better appreciate the power of being continuously filled with his Spirit to be able to abidingly focus with the eyes of our heart at an identity level on the astoundingly immeasurable love of God for each of us.

Firstly, the holistic interpretation of Hebrews encourages us to view our faith journey within the larger narrative of God's redemptive work. By understanding the entire letter and its context, we can move beyond isolated passages that may cause confusion or doubt. This approach helps us grasp the continuity of God's promises and the assurance we have in Christ's perfect sacrifice.

Secondly, the relationship between faith and obedience, as highlighted in Hebrews, calls us to a life of active trust in God's promises. Recognizing unbelief as the ultimate sin and faith as the ultimate act of obedience, we are encouraged to deepen our commitment to Christ daily. This understanding transforms our daily actions and decisions, guiding us to live in a manner that reflects our steadfast faith in Jesus.

Thirdly, the focus on the present, or "today," emphasizes the urgency and relevance of our faith. By continually responding to God's call and maintaining our faith in the present moment, we safeguard ourselves against the dangers of drifting away. This immediate focus helps us stay vigilant and rooted in our relationship with God, ensuring that our faith remains alive and active.

Fourthly, the detailed exegesis of the warning passages reminds us of the serious consequences of neglecting our faith. These passages serve as a sobering reminder to persevere and hold fast to our confession. By understanding the gravity of these warnings, we can better support one another in our faith journeys, offering encouragement and accountability within our Christian communities.

Lastly, the communal aspect of faith highlighted in Hebrews underscores the importance of mutual encouragement and support. By fostering a strong, loving community, we can help one another stay firm in our faith. Regular fellowship, shared worship, and acts of service strengthen our collective resolve and remind us of the love and assurance we have in Christ.

By applying these insights practically, we can correct misconceptions about God and deepen our understanding of His immense love for us. Continuously filled with His Spirit, we can maintain a clear, abiding focus on our identity in Christ, empowered to live out our faith

with confidence and joy. Let us encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "today," so that none of us may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, but instead, remain steadfast in the assurance of Christ's love and salvation.

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