

MOVING ON TO MATURITY
Sinners in the Hands of the Living God
Hebrews 10:26-39

In June, 1741, in Northampton, Massachusetts, Jonathan Edwards delivered what has become one of the most famous messages ever preached on American soil. It was entitled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Over the last 250 years, thousands of high school and college students have studied this message which is now included in the annals of 18th Century literature.

Edwards message was based on Deuteronomy 32:35, “Their foot shall slide in due time” – a passage which speaks of God’s judgment on unbelieving Jews. In his well-known message, Edwards paints for us a graphic description of hell. In fact, it is so graphic that one eyewitness described the audience as moaning, shrieking and crying out for salvation while Edwards was preaching.

Here’s just one small portion of Edward’s sermon:

That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone is extended under you. There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell’s wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor anything to take hold of: there is nothing between you and hell but the air; ‘tis only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up.

And to make sure that the people in his own congregation got the point, he goes on to say, “God is a great deal more angry with great numbers that are now on earth: yea, doubtless, *with many that are now in this congregation.*”

The Bible has a lot to say about hell. And let me be very clear. However we interpret the vivid language used in the Bible to describe hell, hell is very real. It is the ultimate destination of those who reject the saving grace and offer of eternal life in Jesus Christ. I so pray that if you are here this morning and have never repented of your sins and placed your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior, that you will turn to him today. As Edwards rightly says, “It is only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up.” But if you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be saved from eternal hell. Will you do that today?

That being said – and contrary to the thinking of some – Hebrews 10:26-39 *is not talking about hell.*ⁱ This passage, which Jason read for us earlier, has troubled many believers. Several years ago I had a believing student sit in my office and refer to this passage, convinced that he had lost his salvation because of certain sins in his life. Maybe you have thought the same.

Before taking a closer look at these verses, let’s put this passage in context. (Chart) This is the fourth of five warning passages in this book, all of which are addressed to believers, *not* to unbelievers. Warning 1 is “Pay careful attention” (2:1-4). Warning 2 is “Enter God’s rest” (3:1-4:16). Warning 3 is “Go onto maturity” (5:11-6:20). And not warning 4 is “Draw near, don’t give up” (10:19-39).

Several weeks ago we studied together Hebrews 10:19-25. We entitled that section “perseverance:” *per* meaning “through” and “severe” referring to sever, difficult times. We discovered that verses 19-25 tell us that we must do three things if we are to persevere in difficulty. We must first of all *look up* by drawing near to God. Secondly, we must *look ahead* by fixing our hope on Christ’s return. And lastly we must *look out* for one another, giving he needed encouragement and accountability that can spur us on to growth and perseverance.

But what if a believer doesn’t persevere? What if you or I fail to look up, look ahead and look out for others? What if we do pull back from Christ and from the gathered church? What then? What are the consequences? It’s these kinds of questions that the author is answering in verses 26-39.

These verses fall nicely into two sections. In 10:26-31 we discover that the living God disciplines his children who continue to willfully sin. And in verses 32-39 we see that the living God rewards his children who persevere in obedience.

The Living God... Disciplines His Children Who Persist in Disobedience (verses 26-31).

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left...Hebrews 10:26

There is no doubt that the writer is speaking here to *believers* (like you and me) and not mere professors (i.e. unbelievers who happen to be in the congregation). The writer even includes himself in this possibility “If *we* deliberately keep on sinning...”ⁱⁱ

Secondly, he is talking about believers like you and me who *continue in willful sin*: “If we deliberately keep on sinning...”ⁱⁱⁱ But even more specifically, he seems to be referring to the sin of failing to do what he has just commanded us to do, i.e. look up, look ahead and look out (for one another). It seems that he is speaking here of the willful sin of pulling back from both Christ and Christ’s body, the church.

Let me remind you of what these Hebrew believers were facing. Remember, they had come to Christ out of Judaism. But now, as they faced persecution and opposition to their faith, some were pulling back. Some it appears were leaving the community of Christ followers and going to back various expressions of the Jewish faith, with its rituals and sacrifices.

That’s why this verse says that if you do this, “no sacrifice for sins is left.” If you turn away from the one true sacrifice of Jesus Christ that alone can save, then no other sacrifice for sins is left. The Old Covenant sacrifices cannot save you! So don’t go there!^{iv}

But if you do go there, here’s what you have to look forward to:

... a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Hebrews 10:27

What is this “judgment and raging fire” that will consume the enemies of God? Based on his message from Deuteronomy 32, which is later cited in these verses, Edwards believed that this spoke of hell. But does it? I believe the following verses help clarify what the speaker is saying. Notice verse 28:

Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Hebrews 10:28

Several types of sin merited capital punishment in the Old Testament:

1. Blasphemy Leviticus 24:11-16
2. Murder Leviticus 24:17
3. False prophecy Deuteronomy 18:20
4. Idolatry Deuteronomy 17:2-13

The writer to the Hebrews probably has in mind this later passage referring to the sin of idolatry. In fact, in Deuteronomy 17:6 we find the exact same expression “on the testimony of two or three witnesses.”

Idolatry is anything that keeps you and me from loving God with all of our heart, soul and mind. Idolatry keeps you and me from doing the very things we are exhorted to do in the preceding verses: drawing near, holding fast, and gathering together as God’s people.

And when this spirit of idolatry begins to permeate our lives as believers, we can expect the discipline of God. That’s why the writer goes on to say:

How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? Hebrews 10:29

Do you realize that *you as a believer* can “trample the Son of God under foot” and “treat as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant” and “insult the Spirit of grace?” How do we do this?

When we fail to draw near to God based on the work that Christ has done for us, the sacrifice that he paid on the cross, and the freeway of grace that we now have into his very presence, we trample under foot the Son of God. When we pull away from the Church, the body of Christ, and particularly the gathering of believers where the Lord’s Table is celebrated, we treat as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant. And when you and I criticize one another rather than encourage one another as commanded in verse 25, we are insulting the Spirit of grace.

And what are the consequences of this? According to these verses we can expect God’s judgment. But this judgment is not eternal, it is temporal. It is not hell, but rather God’s loving discipline of his children in the present.

How do I know this? Look at the next two verses:

For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.
Hebrews 10:30-31

Both of these Old Testament quotes are taken from Deuteronomy 32:35-36, the very same passage that Jonathan Edwards cited in his well-known sermon. But in contrast to what Edwards taught, these verses have to do with the *temporal* punishment of God’s people in the present, and not the *eternal* punishment of unbelievers in the future.^v

What does this temporal discipline look like? It can be a prolonged illness, the loss of a loved one, or other difficult circumstances. I believe Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 gives us a glimpse of what this could look like. He says concerning those who were treating the Lord’s Table casually:

For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. 1 Corinthians 11:29-32

But does this mean that every time we experience difficulty, loss or illness in our life that God is disciplining or judging us in the spirit of Hebrews 10? Not at all. And we’ll explore that further as we come to Hebrews 12:5ff which are an excellent commentary on these difficult verses in Hebrews 10.

What we need to grasp now from these verses is this: **THE LIVING GOD DISCIPLINES HIS CHILDREN WHO WILFULLY SIN.** Don’t take lightly the grace of God in your life. Paul tells us, “Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God” (Romans 11:22). This is God’s “severe mercy.” Don’t abuse God’s grace in your life. An attitude of deliberately moving away from God and of separating yourself from the gathered church is very serious. You run the risk of experiencing God’s “severe mercy in your life.”

The Living God... Rewards His Children Who Persevere in Obedience

But while God disciplines us – and sometimes severely – when we persist in sin, he also rewards us when we persevere in obedience. And that’s what the following verses tell us beginning in verse 32.

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.
Hebrews 10:32-34

These believers had been willing to count the cost and embrace the cross. We've already pointed out that this book was probably written in the mid-60s AD, just prior to the intense persecutions under Nero. And while these believers had already experienced opposition to their faith, the writer knows that much worse is yet to come. So he's reminding them of how they stood their ground and encouraging them to continue to do so.^{vi}

Though these believers had suffered for their faith, Hebrews 12 tells us that they had not yet shed their own blood. They had not yet faced martyrdom. However, many believers in the years following this time and up until today have paid the ultimate sacrifice. One of the most inspiring examples in the history of the church is Polycarp who was burned at the stake for his faith about 100 years after Hebrews was written. The aged Polycarp had been arrested by the Roman authorities and brought to the arena for execution in front of the cheering crowd. The proconsul pressed him hard and said, "Swear, and I will release you. Revile Christ." Polycarp replied, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me wrong; and how can I now blaspheme my King that has saved me?"

Most of us in the West know little – if anything – of what it means to persevere in the face of opposition to the gospel. We struggle to get to church on Sunday morning, not because of opposition by the authorities, but because we watched TV too late the night before. We hesitate to share our faith, not for fear of being thrown into jail, but because we fear what others might think of us. We fail to consistently remain in God's Word, not because we don't have a Bible, but because we're too busy reading the daily paper or *People* magazine. We know little of perseverance because we haven't been trained by suffering and opposition. And so often, when God does allow suffering in our lives – whether it be physical, emotional or otherwise – our first prayer request is that God get rid of it – "Lord, take it away!" – rather than humbly submitting to God's loving formation of our character.

One of the results of having lives of relative ease and convenience is not only that we often complain about the slightest inconvenience, but we also fail to have our eyes fixed on our eternal reward for obedience. These believers were willing to undergo such persecution, because they knew that they had "better and lasting possessions" that no one could confiscate! So the speaker goes on to encourage them in verse 35:

So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.^{vii} You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. Hebrews 10:35-36

Today, we don't talk much about our eternal reward as believers. A case in point is the recent statement by a well-known author and pastor, very popular among what is known as the emerging church. In a recent interview he is asked: "When you are speaking to your church, do you emphasize the tension between living your dreams on earth and also living for a heavenly reward?" What was his answer?

I don't talk much about heavenly reward and, to be honest, I've been a follower of Christ almost 30 years, and I don't think I've ever spent five minutes thinking about my heavenly role. It doesn't even attract me!^{viii}

Apparently, this well-known writer hasn't gotten the message of Hebrews. And neither have some of us. Why do we think so little of our promised future reward? Possibly because we are too fat and satisfied in the present. On the other hand, what can put our earthly conveniences, creature comforts and temptations into perspective? A fresh take on all that God has promised us at his return.

We've recently watched the Summer Olympics and those highly trained athletes who give their all in months of disciplined training? Why such sacrifice? Their focus is on that medal of gold, silver or bronze and the personal honor that goes with it. They endure in the present because they have their eyes fixed on the reward.

Our heavenly rewards are like that, but with an important difference. Our reward in heaven will honor, not the one receiving it, but the one giving it. I suspect that our eternal reward will reflect the amount of God's glory that we've allowed to shine through us on earth. It may be like a chandelier that has many light bulbs, some 25 watt, some 50 watt, and some 100 watt. The light bulbs as a whole contribute light to the room. That's the way (I believe) it will be in the future kingdom. Some of us will be contributing only 25 watts, others 50 and still others a full 100 watts of God's glory.

This may be what Paul means when he says, "For our light and momentary afflictions are achieving for us an *eternal weight of glory...*" (2 Corinthians 1:17). How much of God's glory will you reflect throughout eternity?

ⁱ There are three basic interpretations of the warning passages in Hebrews. Some say that if you don't persevere as a believer and "deliberately sin" as this passage talks about, then you can lose your salvation and experience eternal judgment. Others understand this passage to teach that if you continue in wilful sin, you were never really saved to start with. This is the basic Calvinistic understanding of the warning passages in Hebrews. I understand this passage to teach that true believers can pull back, fail to persevere, even "trample the Son of God under foot" and "insult the Spirit of grace." In this case, the believer will experience God's temporal judgment in this life and loss of reward in the next.

ⁱⁱ The same expression "the knowledge of the truth" is used four other times in the New Testament where it clearly refers to a genuine understanding and perception of truth associated with salvation (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Tim 2:25; 3:7; Titus 1:1). Furthermore, the "we" of verse 26 corresponds to the three "let us" commands of the preceding verses, all of which are founded upon the two truths of (1) having confidence; and (2) having a great priest.

ⁱⁱⁱ The background for this is found in Numbers 15:29-31: "But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or alien, blasphemes the LORD, and that person must be cut off from his people. Because he has despised the LORD's word and broken his commands, that person must surely be cut off; his guilt remains on him." Numbers 15:30-31

^{iv} Cf. 10:18 "Now where there is forgiveness of these things there is no longer any offering for sin."

^v It's interesting that the writer to the Hebrews doesn't go on to quote the other part of Deut. 32:26b "and have compassion on his servants." Was he thinking however of this verse? It's very possible that he was thinking also of restoration that comes after such judgment.

^{vi} These events too place soon after their conversion ("had received the light"). These believers may have actually ministered to the writer while he was in prison ("sympathized with *my bonds*") as the textual evidence supports. It's

quite possible that the writer is referring to the expulsion of Jews (which would include messianic Jews) from Rome in A.D. 49 under Claudius. See F.F. Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 267.

^{vii} This is the first time we find this word “reward” or “recompense” since 2:2. There it is in a negative sense, the “recompense” for neglecting a so great salvation; but here in a positive sense.

^{viii} Edwin McMannus, *Outreach*

Here again, believers are sometimes disturbed by this verse, because they understand “destroyed” to mean “destroyed in hell” and “saved” to mean “saved in heaven.” But that’s not what the writer is talking about. I believe the best commentary on these verses is found in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15: “By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. 11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, 13 his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. 14 If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. 15 If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.” 1 Corinthians 10:3-5