

Eternal Security and Exegetical Overview of Hebrews

An Attempt to Move the Issue from Proof texting to Texts which Sustain the Argument

Introduction to the Theological Debate

For 500 years, much of evangelical Christianity has been split on the issue of whether a person could ever lose his salvation. While 20 some proof texts can be cited on both sides of the issue, the book of Hebrews is central to the debate since it is one of the very, very few places in scripture which has a sustained discussion on the issue.

Two passages in Hebrews are of particular importance to the doctrine of continuance (6:4-6; 10:26-31), and much has been written on them. Yet, there is much more about continuance in Hebrews than these two passages. In fact, the whole book provides a definitive context which weighs heavily on the interpretation of these two passages and should ultimately determine one's view of Continuance.

This essay provides an overview of such basic exegetical elements as the identity of the recipients, their situation, the author's primary concerns, and the book's structure. These are all very relevant to deciding the question of Continuance.

It is my contention that the apostle was warning the Hebrews of the danger of complete apostasy, and that he feared that their present behavior would eventually lead them to deny the faith and lose their salvation.

On Reading Hebrews

The last thing people need is for some teacher to tell them what Hebrews says. So, I recommend that you take 30-45 minutes of your time and read the book of Hebrews aloud, cover to cover, in a single reading. Anyone who reads it with passion and with an open mind will find it extremely difficult to maintain the unconditional view of Continuance.

As you read through Hebrews, you will find a consistent rhetorical sequence in its structure. Again and again, the apostle lays out an argument for the superiority of Christ. After he develops this argument, he launches into exhortation. These are often marked with the words, "therefore" or some other such consequential modifier, and is laid out as follows:

1. Prologue (1:1-3)
2. Jesus is superior to the angels (1:4-14)
 - Therefore, we must pay more careful attention so that we do not drift away (2:1-4)
3. Jesus had to be made like his brothers in order to be a faithful high priest (2:5-18)
 - Therefore, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess (3:1)
4. Jesus is greater than Moses

- See to it that none of you has a sinful unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God (3:12-19)
5. Jesus' rest is greater than Joshua's rest (ch. 4)
 - Therefore, let us make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall (4:11)
 - Therefore, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess (4:14)
 - It is impossible for [them]..., if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance (5:11-6:12)
 6. Jesus is greater than Aaron's priestly descendants (chs. 5, 7)
 7. Jesus' covenant is greater than the old covenant (chs. 8-10)
 - Therefore...let us draw near to God (10:19-25)
 - Severe warning and encouragement of 10:26-39
 8. Heroes of the faith
 - Therefore, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off hindering sin, run the race with perseverance, and fix our eyes upon Jesus (12:1-3)
 - Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees (12:12)
 9. Final warning and exhortation: Zion & Sinai--See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks

The structure is helpful in understanding the author's purpose. He provides theological arguments to convince them of the superiority of the faith, and then urges them to continue in the faith, sometimes with severe warnings. Thus, the book is primarily written to keep people from turning away from their faith.

The Recipients

One of the issues arising from the Continuance debate in Hebrews is whether the recipients were indeed true believers, or perhaps they might have only appeared to be believers. If they were true believers, and if the apostle warns them of losing their salvation, then a necessary conclusion would be that Continuance in Salvation is not guaranteed.

1. The Hebrews were Christians
 - a. The apostle addresses them as brethren and as sons
 - i. "Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess" (3:1)
 - ii. "See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily..." (3:12)
 - iii. "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus..., let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith..." (10:19-20)
 - iv. "And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:
 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,

and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
because the Lord disciplines those he loves,
and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.'

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (12:5-13).

- v. "Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written you only a short letter" (13:22).
- b. The apostle was urging them to continue in faith. He was not urging them to get saved, but to continue in their salvation.
 - i. "We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?" (2:1-3).
 - ii. "Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess" (3:1).
 - iii. "We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first" (3:14).
 - iv. "Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience (4:11).
 - v. Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess" (4:14).
 - vi. "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus..., let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.... Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess" (10:19-23).
 - vii. "You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised" (10:36).
 - viii. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith..., so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (12:1-3).

- c. They were being persecuted for their faith (10:32-34; 12:4; 13:11-14; cf. 13:2), and the apostle urges them to stay true despite the persecution. Obviously, if he believed that their faith was disingenuous, the argument would have been for them to get saved despite the persecution, rather than to remain in the faith despite the persecution.
 - i. Persecution began soon after “receiving the light”
 - ii. They stood their ground in the face of suffering
 - iii. They were publicly insulted and persecuted
 - iv. Sometimes they stood side by side with those being persecuted
 - v. Some were imprisoned
 - vi. They had not yet been persecuted to the point of blood shed
 - vii. They appeared to have been cast outside of their social group, for the apostle compares their situation to that of Christ who “suffered outside the city gate,” urging them to “go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.”
- d. They experienced the benefits of salvation
 - i. They share in the heavenly calling (3:1).
 - ii. They had come (perfect tense) to share in Christ (3:14).
 - iii. They had free and bold access to the throne of grace (4:16; 10:19)
 - iv. They were being disciplined as sons (12:5-13)
 - v. They had been sanctified (“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?” [10:29]).
 - vi. They had received purification of their sins (“...having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water” [10:22]; cf. 1:3).
 - vii. Heb 6:4-6
This is a controversial and difficult passage which Calvinists must re-interpret to be descriptive of a non-Christian, against overwhelming data.
 - 1. They had been enlightened
 - 2. They had tasted the heavenly gift
 - 3. They shared in the Holy spirit
 - 4. They had tasted the goodness of the Word of God
 - 5. They had tasted the powers of the coming age
 - 6. They had repented
- e. They were already part of the Church
 - i. They were admonished to act like Christian brethren
 - 1. To encourage one another (3:13)
 - 2. To spur one another toward love and good deeds (10:24)
 - 3. To meet regularly for worship (10:25)
 - 4. To keep on loving each other as brothers (13:1)

- ii. They had come not to Sinai, but to Zion (12:22-24)
 - 1. To the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God
 - 2. To the joint worship around the throne, with the saints and celestial beings
 - 3. To the Church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven
 - 4. To the abode of God, Jesus, and the holy people of God
- iii. They had church leaders, whom they must imitate and to whom they must submit (13:7,17)
- iv. Greetings and prayer requests are exchanged between the Hebrews and the other churches (13:18,23,24)

Having analyzed much of the book, only one conclusion can avail regarding the salvation of the recipients: they were genuine believers. They were referred to as brothers and sons. They were being persecuted precisely because their faith was genuine. They experienced the benefits of salvation unique to true believers, such as sharing in Christ, the Spirit, and the heavenly calling; approaching the throne of grace boldly and freely; being disciplined as sons; being sanctified; having their sins sprinkled and atoned for; being enlightened; tasting the heavenly gift and the goodness of the word of God; and having tasted the powers of the coming age. They were already a part of the Church. We should add that if Hebrews were written to non-believers, it would be the only book of the Bible so written.

By now, it should be clear that the Hebrews were genuine believers. This creates a tremendous difficulty for those who believe in guaranteed Continuance (i.e., eternal security). They must explain how the apostle can give such dire warnings to genuine believers if losing one's salvation is impossible.

The Apostle's Urgency and Warnings

Those who believe in guaranteed Continuance must take the apostle's urgings and warnings more seriously than they typically do. So long as the apostle was thought to be issuing the warnings to unbelievers, eternal securitists were prone to dismiss the warnings as not applying to them. However, as we have seen in the previous section, the apostle was indeed issuing the warnings to true believers, and thus, the warnings have direct applicability to all believers.

The apostle's great concern is that the Hebrews would slip into spiritual despondency and end up rejecting their faith. Here is a survey of those passages which deal with the apostle's concerns over the Hebrews' spiritual well-being, along with a survey of the warnings given in his book.

1. Their waning commitment and the apostle's urging to diligence
 - a. "We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?" (2:1-3).
 - b. "It is impossible for [them]...., if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance" (6:4-6)

- c. “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing” (10:25).
 - d. “So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised” (10:35-36).
 - e. “See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?” (12:25).
2. Judgment against those who fail to continue in faith

The apostle warns that believers shall not escape judgment if they neglect or ignore so great a salvation (2:1-3). The following passages provide some help in determining the nature of such judgment.

- a. Judgment is likened to that which visited the Israelites in their desert wanderings (ch. 3)
- b. Judgment is depicted as a double-edged sword, penetrating so deeply as to divide soul and spirit, joints and marrow, judging all thoughts and attitudes of the heart (4:12)
- c. A fearful expectation, of raging fire consuming the enemies of God (10:26-31)
 - i. More severe than the death penalty required of those who broke the Law
 - ii. “The Lord will judge his people”
 - iii. “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”
- d. Divine punishment is more certain for those who refuse him who warned from heaven than the punishment of those who refused him who spoke on earth (12:25)
- e. No more sacrifice--In three passages, the apostle speaks ominously of situations that have no more means of salvation
 - i. It is impossible for people who have experienced such great salvific benefits and have fallen away to be brought back to repentance, because “to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace” (6:4-6)
 - ii. “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (10:26-27)
 - iii. “...When [Esau] wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind [“repentance”-NASB], though he sought the blessing with tears

All these passages tell us one vitally important thing: if you ignore your salvation, if you drift away, if you fall away, if you throw away your confidence, if you refuse him who speaks, then the severest of judgments will come upon you. You will have no means of salvation, but only “a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire” (10:27).

The Apostle's Hopes for the Hebrews

In the process of urging the Hebrews to continue, and warning them of dire consequences for not doing so, the author speaks words of comfort to them.

1. Jesus would help them
 - a. As high priest, he offered atonement and purification of sin (1:3; 2:17; 9:11-14)
 - b. As a human high priest, he sympathizes with our weaknesses and temptations (2:18; 4:14-16)
2. He is "confident of better things in your case" (6:9-12)
3. He includes them among those who do not shrink back, but believe and are saved (10:39)
4. He prays that 1) God will equip them with everything good for doing his will; and 2) God will work in them all that is pleasing to him
5. His anticipated trip to visit them assumes their continued allegiance to Christ.

So, we have the apostle desperately urging the believers not to give up their faith. We have him issuing them some of the most severe warnings found in biblical literature. Yet, afterwards, he gives encouraging words. This is part of the apostle's tact, which we often use in regard to our own children. The words of encouragement do not negate the dire warnings; the warnings are, in fact, real, as are the possibilities of throwing away one's faith.

Conclusion

Only a few passages in the NT contain sustained arguments regarding the doctrine of Continuance. Hebrews is one of them. We all know the dangers of attempting the formulation of a particular doctrine on the basis of proof texts. In the case of the doctrine of Continuance, we do not really need any proof texts, for the whole book of Hebrews addresses it very thoroughly, almost exhaustively.

In Hebrews, the apostle warns genuine believers of the possibility that they may end up rejecting their faith if they neglect their salvation, if they drift away, if they do not draw near, if they deliberately keep on sinning. Consequences for doing so are spelled out in ominous yet definite terms.

People who insist on believing in unconditional Continuance will have to figure out some other way to read the book of Hebrews. Unfortunately for their argument, the text will not permit them to mute the apostle's warnings by claiming that they were issued to non-believers.

Eternal securitists end up doing all kinds of silly things to Hebrews, in order to preserve their doctrine of unconditional Continuance. Not only do they try to claim that Hebrews was written to disingenuous believers, but they also try to claim things like the apostle was only writing hypothetically, or that the judgment spoken of in Hebrew only deals with the extent of our heavenly rewards. Such silliness simply doesn't fit in with the sweeping, intensive seriousness of the apostle's warnings and urgings. If believers were not really in danger of "a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God" (10:27), then he wouldn't have bothered writing this book.

Surely, this is the right way to read the book of Hebrews. Let anyone who remains skeptical pick up the book at this instant and read it cover to cover, in one setting, without constant reference to your Ryrie or MacArthur Study Bible notes.