

## Approaches to the Warning Passages in Hebrews

by Brian Abasciano

- The heavy emphasis in Hebrews on exhortation to persevere in faith in Christ and warning against turning away from Christ and therefore suffering dire consequences raises the issue of whether true believers can turn away from Christ (i.e., commit apostasy) and forfeit salvation/perish as unbelievers.
- I. Three Main Views on the Security of Salvation (limited notes on this because this is a much broader issue than Hebrews)
    1. Faith-conditional security: Perseverance in faith is necessary for final salvation, and true believers can turn away from Christ and so forfeit their salvation. (the Main Arminian View)
    2. Perseverance of the Saints: Perseverance in faith is necessary for final salvation, but true believers cannot turn away from Christ because God will not let them; therefore, they cannot forfeit their salvation. Professing believers who fall away never were true believers or saved in the first place. (the main Calvinist view and of some Arminians)
    3. Free Grace: Perseverance in faith is *not* necessary for final salvation; if a person believes at any point, no matter how short in duration, it does not matter what he does; his salvation is then unconditionally guaranteed and therefore he cannot forfeit his salvation no matter what. (sometimes identified as the view of Moderate Calvinism) – heretical!
  - II. The Main Approaches to the Warning Passages in Hebrews (and elsewhere in the NT)\*
    1. Irresolvable Tension: The text both promises salvation to believers in such a way that they cannot turn away from Christ and perish, and yet through the warnings implies that they can. This is a mystery. These two truths cannot be reconciled by us and we should not try to reconcile them, but give due attention to each when we encounter it in the text.
      - Big problem: Ultimately seems to embrace contradiction.
    2. Hypothetical: The warnings are merely hypothetical employed to impress on the readers the importance of persevering in faith or some other particular point. What they warn against cannot happen, nor can what they threaten.
      - A. Big problem: It makes the warnings misleading and practically meaningless.
      - B. It fosters false assurance if the warnings are genuine and aimed at believers; practically encourages ignoring them, which can lead to doing what they warn against and to final condemnation.
    3. Loss of Rewards: Typically in accordance with the Free Grace view, the consequences threatened are not loss of salvation or the like, but loss of rewards or non-saving blessing.
      - A. Big problem: It offers totally implausible interpretations of what the text actually threatens. Seems especially to be driven by presupposed doctrine imposed on the text.
      - B. See 2.B. above.
    4. Tests of Genuineness: In accordance with Perseverance of the Saints (see I.2. above), the warnings are tests that show if someone is a genuine believer or not. If one heeds the warnings and perseveres in the faith, then he is a true believer. But if he turns away from the faith, he was never a true believer. The warnings are not aimed at true believers, but at false believers.

- A. Problem: The warnings are clearly addressed to believers (the author includes himself, a true believer [e.g., 2:1-4]; he uses address such as “brothers” and sharers “in the heavenly calling” [e.g., 3:1], and ascribes saving reality to them in various ways) and do not seem to show any particular concern for distinguishing true and false believers.
  - B. Problem: Why would it be bad to fall away from false faith? One can only fall away from faith that he has.
  - C. Problem: See 2.B. above.
  - D. Problem: It undercuts assurance in contradiction to the biblical doctrine of assurance, such as found in 1 John 5:13 (though advocates typically think it establishes assurance). If someone can appear to be a true believer to himself and the believers around him, but then fall away and show himself to have never been a true believer, how could we ever know that we are genuine believers and not simply exhibiting a false faith and are actually unsaved and will one day show it?
5. The Means of Salvation: Similar to # 4, but it holds that the warnings are addressed to believers and that the warnings themselves are God’s infallible means for getting true believers to persevere in faith, while false believers will not heed the warnings and thereby will show themselves to never have truly believed.
    - A. Problem: see 4.D. above.
    - B. Problem: It is pointless and meaningless to warn people against impossibilities, and all the more so when they know the warning is against impossibility. The warnings could not serve as a motivation to obey them when those who are addressed are expected to know that they are being warned against impossibilities.
  6. The Possibility of Apostasy/Forfeiting Salvation: The warning passages warn true believers against forsaking Christ and thereby forfeiting salvation because true believers can forsake Christ and forfeit salvation.
    - A. Should also be known as the correct view!
    - B. Problem: Undercuts absolute assurance of future/final salvation since one could choose to turn away from Christ and perish (though advocates would point out that it provides for full assurance of present salvation and strong though not unconditional assurance of final salvation).
    - C. There are other problems that have been charged, but they tend to get into other theological issues that are not as directly tied to the warning passages.
  7. Views 5 and 6 are the most likely, and there is very little difference between them in practical application (though there is big difference in their theological foundations and estimation of their logical implications), for both of them maintain that believers have to take the warnings seriously for themselves and devote themselves to persevering in faith.