

A Terrifying Warning
Hebrews 10:26–31
April 14, 2024

Chris brought it up last week. And it's worth staring squarely at the facts. An estimated 40 million people—one in eight Americans—have stopped attending church in the past 25 years, a shift that one man called the “largest concentrated change in church attendance in American history.”¹ So, while *we* have celebrated a number of baptisms over the past couple months, the truth *surrounding* us is that more Americans alive today have “converted” *out* of religion than have converted to all forms of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam combined.² So, while we're grateful for what's happening here, *that* is what surrounds us. If the world *feels* increasingly secular, it's because it is.

And our first impulse to that truth shouldn't necessarily be to put on the gloves, but to mourn. We grieve that our kids or our grandkids will grow up in a world that stares into the sky, observes evidence of transcendence, and then promptly and disturbingly worships the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25). God's people ought to lament the secularization of our world, our “leaders,” our zip code, and even sometimes those that sit at our dinner table.

On *that* front, these facts are worth staring at because it's not *just* the abstract “estimated 40 million people,” it's people we know and love. I've heard you say some of their names over the past couple Wednesdays. Imagers of God that you spend a lot of time with do not come *close* to believing the words in the book we just read. Sometimes they mock the most precious sentences you've ever heard. These facts aren't mere numbers; the numbers have names.

After moving from “an estimated 40 million people,” to something more personal—someone you know and love—we can *then* move even closer to the threat. Because it's presumptuous to assume that everyone gathered in this room—professing Christ *today*—will continue to do so until the day they meet Him.

Sin deceives. We see it *broadly* in our world. We've seen it *up close* in those we love. And we've fought it *within* ourselves.

Though the numbers of those walking away in *our* day stagger, the church has faced this issue since its inception. I recently read C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*. And in that short book, there's a scene where a man who no longer believes is speaking to another man who *also* no longer believes. In this conversation, they're reflecting together on their shared unbelief. What I found most helpful in their conversation was the honesty concerning *the process* by which these men abandoned the faith. One of them, looking back and reflecting, admits, “Having allowed oneself to drift, unresisting, unpraying, accepting every half-conscious solicitation from our desires, we reached a point where we no longer believed the Faith.”³ In other words, he admits it didn't happen overnight. Little by little—unresisting, unpraying, giving in—they drifted.

Maybe that language reminds you of a passage back in Hebrews 2: **For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it** (Heb. 2:1). The “estimated 40 million” aren't the first to drift, finding themselves far away from where they started. Nor is the person we know. Nor were the characters in Lewis's book. This has been an issue since the inception of the church.

Because it's an issue that plagued the first-century church as well, the book of Hebrews moves back and forth from exposition to exhortation, to exposition and then back to exhortation.

¹ Jake Meador, “The Misunderstood Reason Millions of Americans Stopped Going to Church,” in *The Atlantic*, July 29, 2023.

² This assertion is made by Derek Thompson, “The True Cost of the Churchgoing Bust,” in *The Atlantic*, April 3, 2024.

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 38. Caveat: he's great, but Lewis isn't right about everything in that book.

The expositions detail truths concerning the person of Christ. And the exhortations—some call them warning passages—encourage those hearing these truths to live as if they were actually true.⁴ The first warning passage in Hebrews 2 warned against drifting. The warning passages that follow seem to *build* in intensity.⁵ And the fourth warning passage, the one we study today, is arguably the strongest.⁶ Note first:

1. A Terrifying Warning (vv. 26–27)

As we've said more than once, if we're going to read Hebrews' exhortations rightly, we have to disabuse ourselves of the notion that the word "warning" only carries negative connotations. Warnings *can* be loving. They can be for our good. And they can be used to deliver.

Verse 26 uses a pronoun that clues us in to something *else* quite important. The author writes, "we" in verse 26: **For if we go on sinning.** Why is the word "we" important to note? Because he—the author of the book of Hebrews—includes *himself* in this warning.

Why is *that* key to point out? Because it's worth clarifying the ones *to whom* this warning is addressed. Is it possible that *some* of those hearing these words hadn't *truly* believed, merely giving the appearance of trusting the gospel? Is that possible? Yes, it absolutely is. It's *always* possible. Does someone like *that* need to be warned? Absolutely, and firmly.

But, *also*—and this is vital for our understanding—can God use warnings in the life of a believer as a means to spur *them* on to perseverance? He can; and He does.⁷ He's a God of *both* ends *and* means. Again, some of this comes down to whether we think warnings can be loving—even merciful—as well as whether or not we think warnings can be heeded.

So, for the believer or for someone *yet* to believe, before we dig into the text, *don't* think it's for someone else.

With all that in mind, we can now read the warning of verse 27 in its entirety: **For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth.** The first word, "for" connects *this* passage to what preceded it.⁸ How vital are the exhortations we considered last week, that we're to draw near to God, that we hold fast the confession of our hope, and that we consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds? Just how important or serious are those instructions?⁹

Well, the doing of those things is proof that we're persevering. *And* they're things that enable our perseverance. Further, the alternative—that we *don't* persevere—comes with sobering consequences. Verse 26 continues: **For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.**

First, let's clarify what the author means by going on sinning willfully. I imagine you can *hear* the present tense ongoing nature of this posture: **go on sinning willfully.** We noted this same continuous language back in Hebrews 6.¹⁰ Why is it that those addressed in *that* passage can't be renewed to repentance? Because there's an ongoing, present-tense posture they *continue* to hold.¹¹ Hebrews 6:6: **They are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding Him**—that is, *continuing* to hold Him—**up to contempt.**

⁴ See George Guthrie, *Hebrews*, NIVAC, 27–28.

⁵ Tom Schreiner, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance*, 193.

⁶ Peter O'Brien, *God Has Spoken in His Son*, NSBT, 182.

⁷ See Schreiner, *The Race Set Before Us*, 200ff.

⁸ Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 280.

⁹ Tom Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EBTC, 323.

¹⁰ To rightly grasp these warning passages in Hebrews, it's important to keep them connected to one another.

¹¹ Harris, 138; Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 189; Harold Attridge, *Hebrews*, 172.

It's important to emphasize that as the author warns those drifting in Hebrews 2, Hebrews 6 and Hebrews 10, he's *not* describing a one-time fall. He's not describing a short season of disobedience. He's not *even* describing a period of dryness. He's talking about someone that chooses to walk away, and then *stays* away, and then *continues* to reject. It's impossible for that person to repent since—*because*—he or she *continues* to reject. To put it simply: you can't reject and repent at the same time. This phrase—**go on sinning willfully**—carries the same idea, a present tense, ongoing, posture toward the work of Christ.

And, as we'll see, to make it even *more* distressing is that this posture persists *after* hearing clearly about that work. Verse 26: **For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth.** Has the book of Hebrews *only* been warning after warning? No, not at all. In fact, chapters 7, 8, 9, and most of 10 have been rich, thoughtful, and compelling expositions of the surpassing glory of Christ's work on our behalf. His priesthood isn't temporary. Unlike every other priest these Jewish Christians had ever known, His work isn't affected by death. His is a priesthood marked by the power of an indestructible life. Nor is His work affected by sin. He didn't need to make a sacrifice for His *own* deeds. He's holy, innocent, and undefiled (Heb. 7:26). Therefore, rather than His work being affected *by* sin, His work *affects* sin. Meaning, He cleanses us—not partially—but fully. And because He's a priest forever, His full forgiveness endures. He's at the right hand of God, interceding for us even *now*.

Could I say more? Could *you* say more? We both could. We've heard more. And the point of this verse is, *if* you've heard all this and you *continue* to reject it, what options do you think are left? What else is there? Verse 26 continues: **For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.** In other words, if you've turned your nose up at the salvation offered, there's no plan B. God isn't coming in the flesh to die again. His sacrifice was once for all.

That's hope for us who've trusted Him. No further sacrifice is needed. But it's terrifying for those who've *yet* to trust. Because there's nowhere else to get forgiveness.¹²

Therefore, something *else* awaits them. Which is what verse 27 describes. We'll read the end of verse 26 to grasp the flow: **there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.**

The eclipse fell on my day off this past week, so like 2017 we took a quick day trip to see it in its totality.¹³ If you've never seen it in totality you have to imagine that at 2pm it almost suddenly looks as if the sun has set. It's not pitch black, but it looks like 8:15 will tonight. In a huge field in Walnut Ridge, Arkansas, a 360-degree sunset surrounded us, the bugs and birds started chirping like it was night, and my kids were wide-eyed, saying things like, "What just happened?"

I'd seen this before. There were things I noticed in 2017. And then there were things I noticed this week I didn't notice then. One was what happened immediately *after* the eclipse. In Walnut Ridge, there were 3 minutes and 44 seconds of totality that began at 1:54 CST. So, during *part* of 1:54, and all of 1:55, 1:56, 1:57, and 1:58 it looked like 8:15 at night. But at some point, during the minute we call 1:59, the sunset disappeared, the sky lit up, and the 2:00 sun returned. The point is this: even when it was still 99% blocked, light from a fire 93 million miles away lit up a field in Northeast Arkansas. That's a furious fire.

And I'm just not sure we're thinking clearly if we're thinking the One that made *that* is Someone to be trifled with. Hebrews says for those that persist in rejection, they await a **terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.**

¹² Harris, 281.

¹³ "The difference between 99% and 100% eclipse is . . . night and day." – Tim Murphy

If you're still on the M'Cheyne reading plan, you read Leviticus 10 this past week. I hope Hebrews opens that book up for you. And maybe we assume access to God less. Because Nadab and Abihu did as they pleased; and the fury of a fire consumed them.

Verse 27 is pointing toward, referring to, a final judgment.¹⁴ Those that have chosen to oppose God *will be* opposed by God. It's a terrifying warning.

2. A Terrifying Warning Based on Precedent (vv. 28–29)

Throughout Hebrews, we've seen the Mosaic Covenant/Mosaic Law contrasted time and again with something clearly and objectively superior. The contrast between the two continues today, but in *this* case it's punishment under the Mosaic Law put in contrast with the judgment meted out against those that reject God's Son.¹⁵ In essence, if Jesus is greater than Moses, and the promises He offers are better, would not the rejection of Him and those promises bring about more severe consequences?

To bring about the contrast, the author first reminds us of a consequence in Moses' day. Verse 28: **Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.** To set aside the Law meant to reject it as a whole,¹⁶ to treat it as if it did not exist.¹⁷ To do so would be considered blatant and outright rebellion.¹⁸

For those that did *that* under the Mosaic Law, what were the consequences? Hear Deuteronomy 17:2: **If there is found in your midst, in any of your towns, which the Lord your God is giving you, a man or a woman who does what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God, by transgressing His covenant, and has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, or the sun or the moon or any of the heavenly host, which I have not commanded . . .** That passage goes on, saying that *if* such a person is found, and after a *thorough* investigation of those claims, verse 6: **on the evidence of two or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death.**

They had a process. But should the charge be found true—that one had blatantly and outrightly rebelled against the Law of Moses—there was no mercy. Verse 28: **Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.** If we're following the logic, we note that *death* came to someone that rejected the Law of Moses. And the question that follows—the *lesser to greater* logic is this: should someone that's heard of Christ, rejecting *Him*, suffer a *lesser* consequence? Verse 29 answers: **How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?**

We've seen this language about trampling under foot recently. Maybe you recall something along those lines in the Sermon on the Mount. If so, it ought to shock you in *this* context, and with *this* object. Because in Matthew 5 Jesus declared that salt that's lost its taste is **no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men** (Matt. 5:13). That's the imagery. Yet *here* it's not worthless salt being trampled upon, but the Son of God.¹⁹ So, if death came to those that set aside the Law of Moses, what would the Father do to those that trample His Son?

¹⁴ Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 324.

¹⁵ Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 325.

¹⁶ Attridge, 294.

¹⁷ Harris, 282.

¹⁸ Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 325.

¹⁹ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 540. The only place this verb is used with God or His Son as the object.

The description of this rebellion progresses. Verse 28: **and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified.** Maybe those that reject Christ wouldn't say that part out loud, but functionally this is what ongoing rejection shouts. To turn from Him—and His sacrifice—is *not* to merely say that His blood is common—“just like any other blood”—it's to actually demean or profane it.²⁰ It is to say *to* the Father that His Son's death means *nothing* to you.

And our Trinitarian God is not a dispassionate Stoic. He takes no pleasure in wickedness; He abhors evil; He hates all who do iniquity (Psalm 5:4–5). And there is no wickedness, no evil, no iniquity more acute or abhorrent than to spit upon the death of God's Son—to call *it*, and by extension *Him*, unclean. Therefore, the ESV captures the last clause rightly: **and has outraged the Spirit of grace?** To reject the gracious offering of the Son is an insult to God Himself.

So, the question at the front of verse 29 rings. If death came to those that set aside the Law of Moses, **how much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?** How much severer punishment does *that* person deserve?

Death is one thing. But there is something *worse* than death.

Throughout Hebrews, the author has told us repeatedly *where* Jesus is. He's at the right hand of the Father, seated at God's throne, in a heaven that our best 5 seconds haven't earned. And He's *there* as a forerunner, a pioneer, *so that* He might bring sons and daughters to glory with Him (Heb. 2:9–10). That's *where* He is. And that's *why* He came from heaven, endured what He did, and then ascended in glory. That we might look to Him as our righteousness, to His work as our cleansing, and join Him from everlasting to everlasting. He's done it. He's there. He'll *always* be there. And He made it possible for us to draw near.

And yet, we dare not blunt the edge of truth. If we *don't* go to Him, we won't go where He is. **There no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.**

You say, “I'm not God's enemy.” You are if you dishonor His Son. Honor Him, lest He be angry, and you perish.

That's Psalm 2. Hebrews 10 isn't saying anything new.

3. A Terrifying Warning Based on His Word (vv. 30–31)

Verse 30: **For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge His people.”**

We talked about anger last week in our Bible Study Groups. Maybe you're angry. Maybe you'd say it's for good reason. You're tired of the lies. You're tired of those things that oppose God being celebrated. It's true; sometimes our indignance is righteous. We're joining the Lord in abhorring that which is evil (Rom. 12). Yet, it's important to say that we've *never* done so perfectly. Our indignation—even at unholy things—is never *perfectly* holy. If we think so, then our deceitful hearts have duped us yet again. We're angry at things. Sometimes rightly. But our anger is *always* affected by sin.

Unlike God. He's not ill-tempered, swayed by a swell of emotion. He's *only* ever angry at that which is unrighteous. And *every* ounce of that anger is flawlessly just.

And the word of God tells us that He's stored up a holy anger at those that have opposed Him (Rom. 2). And that one day He'll pour it out. Which is what this passage says. There's a severer punishment coming because **we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.”** We

²⁰ Harris, 284.

know *Him*, meaning, who He is, His character. *And* we know what He's said. If I were to convey this verse in the tersest of terms, it'd be the Maker of all things declaring, "To *Me*, Vengeance." The "me" is emphatic—in bold—and it includes the idea of possession.²¹ Vengeance is *His*.

The One that possesses a holy vengeance will—future tense—repay.

This is a comfort for God's people. He'll make all things right. But, for those that haven't believed, if seen rightly, this truth terrifies. Should the skeptic in this room desire to remain on his or her throne, persisting in the mirage of a temporary rule, then he or she should know they are this God's adversary. He will repay those that deliberately, repeatedly, and obstinately reject Christ.²² Vengeance is His.

And verse 31 is chilling in its simplicity:²³ **It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.** I was at a pastors' meeting this week, talking with a guy who was preaching on the resurrection this morning. He asked what I was preaching. I replied, "Hebrews 10." He said, "Oh, I'm quoting from that Sunday morning." I said, "I bet you're not quoting the section I'm preaching." And then I quoted this verse: **It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.**

The intensity of that sentence was probably a bit awkward over brunch. And so, he said, "I bet you can make that a comfort. The hands of God holding us." I didn't say this out loud, but I thought, "I *could* say that. But that's *not* close to what this is saying." I'm tempted to blunt the edge of it, but this is a warning. It's a simple, stark, and chilling one: **It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.**

Conclusion

To hear this rightly, we need to hear the warning clearly. But we also must recall that warnings can be loving. And further, they can be heeded.

And finally, we also ought to bear in mind the genre of this letter. The book of Hebrews is a sermon. The author is a preacher, exhorting a congregation waffling under persecution. So, though they might *claim* Christ, the author of Hebrews doesn't assume a divine perspective of their ultimate fate.²⁴ He can't see their heart. Nor can he see the nooks and crannies of their lives over the next thirty years. He doesn't know what they're wrestling with, nor what they'll face in the future. So, with his limited knowledge, watching their slow drift, what can he do? What *must* he do? Warn.

He's not saying they've *already* walked away. Nor is he even saying they will. He's *just* saying, "Don't." Because if you do, this is what awaits you.

The warning itself is a mercy. It is loving. It can be heeded. In fact, His warnings *always* accomplish His purpose in the lives of those He purchased.

²¹ The dative of possession.

²² Harris, 285.

²³ Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 328.

²⁴ Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 180