

FEARFUL EXPECTATIONS

Hebrews 10:26–31 • Pastor Luke Herche

Please turn with me, if you would, in your Bibles to Hebrews chapter 10, verses 26–31. That'll be our sermon text for this morning, Hebrews 10:26–31. And before we read that together, let's pray together.

Our Lord Jesus, we do come, we come to you. We come to you this morning because we need you. We come to you because we are sinful and broken. We come to you because we are weak and weary. And we pray that you would meet with us, that you would meet with us in your word. And, Lord Jesus, we come to a difficult passage of your word this morning, a challenging passage, and so we pray especially that you would meet with us, that you would—even in the midst of this difficulty—that you would remind us of your grace and mercy. Teach us, Jesus, by your Spirit. We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.

Hebrews chapter 10, beginning with verse 26.

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 spurned 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.

We are in an interesting cultural, historical moment, a moment where people are crying out for accountability. Think first about the "Me Too" movement. What did that movement want? It wanted men, typically men in positions of power and influence and authority, to be held accountable. Or think about the present protests over the killing of George Floyd and many others. What do they want? They want police officers and government officials to be held accountable.

Now I'm not trying to make a political statement here. I'm making an observation about the human desire for accountability. And accountability is one of two hard things we're going to talk about this morning. And I do have a request before we get started. I want to talk with you this morning about difficult things and I want you to promise me that you'll stay with me to the end. Not because there's going to be any big reveal at the end. But I want you to stay with me because half of the truth is often twice as dangerous as a lie. And I do plan to land at the grace of God so that we can rest in God's grace, even in the midst of hard truths.

Our outline this morning is two hard words, "Apostasy" and "Accountability," and we're going to break each of those down. And let me say, if after this sermon you have questions, that's okay. These are hard things, not just hard to understand, but hard to hear. And you will likely have questions and that's all right. Don't keep them to yourself. God has given us the church for a reason. Sin is deceitful and Satan wants us to misunderstand. And so, take your questions to someone you know and trust in the church, talk about those things together, and of course, feel free to come and talk with me or one of the other elders.

By the way, I should say I talked about at least apostasy a few weeks back—maybe a few months back now—in a sermon on Hebrews chapter six, which was called "Apostasy and Assurance." And so, if after the sermon you're wrestling with assurance, go listen to that, that may be helpful to you. Either way, again, go and talk to someone about it.

So number one: **Apostasy**.

Now apostasy, or to apostasize, is to abandon one's former position. And actually the very possibility of apostasy has been debated in Christian circles under the question, "Can someone fall away from the faith?" Which is an important question in the Christian life. And this passage is one that is appealed to to say, "Yes, someone can fall away from the Christian faith." And yet, even if so, you still have to answer another question, which is what does that mean? Does that mean that my salvation is in doubt? Does that mean that I can be saved one moment and later lose my salvation? Can there be no certainty, no security, no assurance in the Christian life?

Well, historically, the Reformation—from one perspective—was actually all about this idea of assurance. The Roman Catholic Church taught that no one could know for sure that they would finally be saved, because they thought that at any moment you could sin yourself out of grace, and unless you received the right sacrament and performed the right penance, you could be

utterly and eternally lost. But the reformers taught, to the contrary, that we are saved by grace through faith and based on the work of Christ. And so based on that work, we can have a genuine and sure certainty of our salvation. And I think that is true. We can have a genuine and sure certainty of our salvation in Christ Jesus. And I think that apostasy is a reality. So how does that all fit together?

Well, our text puts it in terms of "sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth," and I want to ask a few questions about this. So first, what does it mean to sin deliberately here? Second, what does the writer mean by receiving the knowledge of the truth? And third, what does it mean that for those who go on sinning deliberately "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins"?

And so we're going to look at the path of apostasy, the antecedent of apostasy, and the consequence of apostasy. You can see that outline in your bulletin: the path, the antecedent, and the consequence.

So first: ***The Path***.

What does it mean to sin deliberately? Look again at verse 26. Verse 26 says, "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins."

Now, I don't know about you, but most of my sin is deliberate. It's never purely an accident. I yell at my boys because I want to yell at my boys. It's not accidental. It's not like tripping over a misplaced toy, right? My heart is active and my sin flows out of my heart. Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks and the body acts.

If we read these words in this way—that simply any deliberate sin is what is being talked about here—it seems that anyone who sins after becoming a Christian—"receiving the knowledge of the truth," if that's what that means—loses their salvation. "There no longer remains a sacrifice for sin." Now, thankfully, that's actually not at all what the writer means. And so we need to look at the passage in context to understand it a little better. Remember, the writer sees us, us Christians, as in a similar position to Israel. After Israel came out of Egypt, that generation failed to enter the promised land. Why did they fail? Well the writer said back in chapter three, verse 19, "they were unable to enter because of unbelief." And in chapter four, verse two, he says, "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."

So it's clear the reason they could not enter was because of unbelief. And yet the writer also calls that sin. The only other use of this word for "sinning" in 10:26 is found in chapter three, verse 17, about those who sinned in the wilderness. And sinning deliberately for Israel meant something like this: "We've seen what you've done God, we've come out of Egypt, we've received manna from heaven, but we really don't believe your word. We don't trust your promises. And we're not going to keep your law. In fact, we're going to make an idol for ourselves as a more user-friendly kind of deity." So in short, what the writer means by sinning deliberately, by stubbornly remaining in their sin, is what we would call apostasy. It means the complete rejection of the faith. He means hearing the gospel, but deciding not to believe it, deciding to continue in your sin because you're continuing in unbelief.

Now that understanding of this phrase "sinning deliberately," a stubborn desire or stubborn decision to continue in sin rather than believing the gospel, that's actually good news for some of us. Because, you know, if you're struggling with sin, if you keep trying but keep failing, if you hate your sin and just wish it would go away, that is not what the writer is talking about here. True Christianity is not a "three strikes and you're out" religion. That's that's not the way Christianity works. So by "sinning deliberately" he means deliberately ignoring or abandoning the truth, and continuing to walk in unbelief.

Second, let's talk about ***The Antecedent of Apostasy***. And by antecedent I just mean what went before it, or what was the condition of people before that apostasy took place, or what does the writer mean by receiving the knowledge of the truth.

Now think about, again, the context of this verse and think about the last few chapters. What have we been talking about for a few months now, it seems? We've been talking about the work of Jesus as our great high priest, Jesus as our substitute sacrifice, Jesus as dying in our place for our sin, Jesus as shedding his blood for us on the cross. This is the truth that the writer is talking about here. When he talks about "the knowledge of the truth" he means the knowledge of the gospel.

And consider the historical context for a moment: the people to whom Hebrews was written were likely Jewish Christians who were tempted to return to Judaism. Christians were being persecuted. We'll see that even more so later on in the letter. Christians were being persecuted, which means their life was easier as Jews. And so why not turn back to Judaism? Like Israel in the wilderness, they had seen the work of God, they had seen his salvation, this time in the cross and the resurrection, but they were contemplating going back to Egypt. "Receiving the knowledge of the truth" here means they had

heard the gospel. They had understood the logic of Jesus fulfilling the Old Testament and its sacrifices on some level. And yet they were still tempted to turn back. It was safer under Judaism. It was easier under Judaism. Judaism had the official protection of the Roman law, but Christianity did not. And so they've entered into Christianity, they've heard the gospel, but there's grumbling in the wilderness.

And sometimes Christianity is not so easy, right? We've come to understand the gospel. We've joined the church. We've started reading our Bibles, but then things get hard, and like the seed that lands in the shallow soil in Jesus' parable our faith begins to wither and we're tempted just to turn away.

Which brings us then to the third thing about apostasy: ***The Consequence***.

What does it mean that there would "no longer remain a sacrifice for sins"? It doesn't mean if you fall into sin Jesus' sacrifice won't cover you. That's an absurd position. The very purpose of Jesus' sacrifice is to cover our sins. The reason Jesus came is because we sin. That's God's grace. Once, when Jesus was talking with his disciples about forgiveness, he said they were to forgive someone who sins against them 77 times, or even seven times 70 times. Another time he said if your brother "sins against you seven times in the day and turns to you seven times saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." Now if God expects us to forgive repeatedly in such a way, do we expect him to forgive any less? No, right? Not at all, right? Our mercy is modeled off of our Father's. So the purpose of the sacrifice of Jesus is for our forgiveness. Every time you turn to God in Christ and repent, you are forgiven. Or as John says, as we quote so often in this church, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

So what does verse 26 mean, then, that "if we go on sinning deliberately there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins"? Well, again, consider the context. Those first readers, they had heard the gospel. They had some knowledge of the truth—the truth of Jesus being high priest and sacrifice—but they're tempted to turn back to Judaism. Now, Judaism had a sacrifice. The writer of Hebrews just talked about that nonstop. So you might wonder, "How can the writer say, 'If you turn back to Judaism, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sin.'" And there are two possibilities in answering that question.

Some take it this way: they say, the writer knew the temple was about to be destroyed. And historically that was true. It would be destroyed in 70 A.D. Taken this way, very literally, very soon, Judaism would have no sacrifice for sins, as is the case today. And so to turn back to Judaism, would be to be without a sacrifice.

But I actually think it means something else. The writer has told us that the Old Covenant sacrifices in themselves did nothing. They could not take away sin. What they did do was point us forward to the sacrifice of Jesus. And so their efficacy was in that they pointed to the effectual sacrifice of Jesus Christ. As Old Testament believers looked to the sacrifice, they were in effect, looking to Jesus. But if Christ has come, and I reject his sacrifice, the only thing I have left is the empty shadow of the Old Covenant. There is nothing back in Old Covenant Judaism that hasn't been fulfilled in Christ except an empty shell, a shadow.

The shadow once pointed to the reality, but now the reality has come. And to reject the reality and cling to the shadow is to cling to something that is empty and meaningless on its own. Hence, Hebrews 10:26, "if we go on sinning deliberately, after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins." That is, if they reject the gospel after hearing about Jesus, but instead turn back to Judaism, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins. Now of course, in one sense, that's true for every one of us. If we reject the gospel, there is no other sacrifice for sins. If we reject Jesus We are still in our sin.

Now the question comes up, "But were these people saved or weren't they?" " Now, as we said, when we looked at chapter six, those who "go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth" were a part of the church. They had some basic knowledge of the gospel. But that does not mean that they had saving faith. They were at a crossroads. "Do I turn back to the empty sacrifices of Judaism, or do I place all my faith in the effectual sacrifice of Jesus?" Maybe that is true of some of you listening. You've grown up in the church, you've been active in the church, you have some knowledge of the truth. But being a Christian has gotten hard for whatever reason and you're tempted to turn back, to give up, to drift away. One thing that Hebrews has made abundantly clear is we need a sacrifice for sin. We need our consciences cleansed. We need the intercession of our Great High Priest. So don't don't turn back, don't drift away, but press on and cling to the work of Jesus. Cling to the sacrifice of Christ. Rest in his work.

So that's point one. Apostasy. The path and deceit and the consequence of apostasy.

Two, let's talk about **Accountability**.

I started out saying that in this current cultural, historical moment we desire accountability. We see people asking for accountability. And whenever we see people in positions of authority abuse that authority, we want them to be held accountable. That makes sense. And the rhetoric often includes strong polarizing denunciations of the actions of others. The truth is, however, while we want others to be held accountable, we are slow to accept that we might be held accountable. While we're quick to demand justice, we're slow to admit that we often find ourselves on the wrong end of God's law. And when we turn to passages like Hebrews 10 we find the writer's language about "a fearful expectation" and the "fury of fire" we find that language intemperate and maybe even narrow minded.

Well, let's talk about this a little bit and we'll talk about it under four heads: the weight of accountability, the increase of accountability, the irony of accountability and the equity of accountability. The weight, the increase, the irony, and the equity.

First, ***The Weight***.

Look again at verses 26 and 27. "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." Notice the weightiness. For those who reject the gospel two things follow.

First, there's something subjective going on. All they have to look forward to is judgment. That is, what is reasonable for those who have rejected Christ is that they live in fear. Now we're often quick to assuage fear, right? We want to assure people that God loves them, assure them that he cares for them. And while I think it's true that God on some level does love all people, that doesn't take away from the fact that a day of reckoning is coming. A day of accountability will come for all people. And so fear makes sense if I am facing a day of judgment.

The second thing that follows rejecting the gospel in verse 27 is, of course, the judgment itself. Not only is there fear now, but what the writer describes as "a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries." Again, notice the weight of this language. It is heavy, and it should feel heavy. It shouldn't make you feel good inside. That is not what this passage is designed to do. And I say that because we're kind of a feelings driven culture. We think if something doesn't make me feel good, it must be bad. But of course, that's not the case. Sometimes serious messages are necessary. Sometimes we should be afraid. Warnings about our health, for example, are not designed to make us feel good. But the

fact that such warnings may make you feel bad, or even a little bit afraid, that doesn't make it less true. Scripture teaches that [there is] a judgment for those who reject the gospel, and that such a warning may make you feel bad doesn't make it less true.

Right, so that's the weight. The weight of this accountability. Second, ***The Increase*** of it.

Our writer makes an argument from the lesser to the greater, as he is so fond of doing. He says, in verses 28 and 29, he says, "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 spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?" He's already made a similar argument, actually, back in Hebrews chapter two. He said, "For since the message declared by angels"—that is the law of Moses—"proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard. " And his point is this: the law of Moses was important...but the gospel is vastly more important. The law of Moses came through angels to Moses; the gospel came straight from Jesus, the Son of God, to the apostles. Ignoring the law of Moses meant death. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have treated the gospel with contempt? The gospel is the message of God's love found in his Son—God's costly love, the Son's sacrificial love. If we treat the message of God's love with contempt—and that is what this language of "trampling underfoot" and "profaning the blood of the covenant" means—if we treat the message of God's love with contempt, what do we expect will happen? It's as if the writer said, "To disobey God's law is bad; but to despise God's love is far, far worse."

That's the increase of accountability. It's one thing, it's bad, to disobey the law of Moses, but it's far worse—it's far worse—to despise God's love in the Gospel.

So that's the weight and increase. Third, let's talk about ***The Irony of Accountability***.

Verse 30, begins "For we know him who said, 'Vengeance is mine. I will repay.'" I want to camp out on understanding the vengeance and repayment of God for just a moment. Often we think it's wrong or harsh or cruel for God to hold us accountable. But the real irony of accountability is that God simply gives us over to our own sin. G. K. Beale, one Bible scholar and writer, stresses this in a little book called *Redemptive Reversals*. And he says this idea is

found repeatedly in the Old Testament where God punishes sinners by means of their own sin. And Beale quotes passages like, one that's well known, Leviticus 24, "If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him." And this is similar to the words of Jesus that are often paraphrased as "those who live by the sword will die by the sword."

We also find this kind of thing, taking a step further, even in the Psalms. And Psalm 7, speaking of the wicked man, says, "He makes a pit, digging it out, and falls into the hole that he has made. His mischief returns upon his own head, and on his own skull his violence descends." You see God's judgment on the wicked person in Psalm 7 is allowing the person's own sins to return back upon his head. In other words, God's vengeance is allowing people to reap what they sow. Proverbs says, in Proverbs 14:12, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death." See God's judgment is often giving you over to your own way, which ends in death. It's to be caught in your own schemes (Psalm 10, verse two). It's to lie in wait for your own blood and set an ambush for your own life (Proverbs 1:18). And we see this clearly, more clearly than any other place maybe, in Romans chapter one which says, "the wrath of God is revealed against men." And how is it revealed? Three times we are told that God gave them up to what was in their own hearts. God judges us by giving us over to ourselves. That's actually the irony of accountability. How does God hold us accountable? He just gives us what we want.

C. S. Lewis talks about this in *The Great Divorce*, he says, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy I will be done.'" Lewis goes on and says, "All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. [To] those who knock it is opened." Now some people think that C. S. Lewis is actually being weak on hell here. I don't think so at all. Lewis teaches that hell is the necessary outcome of a character set against God. A character more and more turned in on one's self. That is hell. This isn't getting God off the hook, as if God could say, "Well, I didn't do the judging. You did that yourself. It's not my fault. I didn't send you to hell, you chose it," as if God were passive in judgment. I don't think that's what it does.

You know, over the past 24 years of being a Christian, one of the things that I have prayed for as much as anything else in one way or another is just this: God saved me from myself. Early in the Christian life, someone gave me a Chris Rice album because they thought I would sympathize with the song "Clumsy." And there was a line on that album that has stuck with me, which is,

"Freedom from myself will be the sweetest rest I've ever known." God's grace frees us from ourselves—from our sinful selves. God's judgment gives us over to ourselves. I don't want to be left alone with my pride, my selfishness, my conscience, my fear. That would be hell. Literally, hell is God inflicting us on ourselves. God will repay, verse 30 says. And given all that Scripture says, he will do that by returning one's sins on their own head, That is, by giving you over to yourself.

That's the weight and then the increase and then the irony of accountability.

Fourth, and finally, ***The Equity of Accountability***.

On whom does the Lord inflict this weighty, increased, ironic accountability? Verse 30, says something that might surprise us. It says, "The Lord will judge his people." Peter said something similar in 1 Peter chapter four. He says, "For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God." Now, why would God judge his own people? I mean, I thought the whole point of being God's people is that we're then free from judgment. Well, let's start further out for a minute. Sometimes people ask, "Well, what about people who have never heard the gospel? Can they be judged?" And there are a couple of things worth saying here. The first is that everyone is fallen in Adam. That is, the human race rebelled. When a country goes to war that whole country is at war. And the human race, as a race, went to war with God in the garden, whether we've heard the gospel or not.

And yet, people will only be judged according to what they have been given. God is not unjust. Now that's not the same thing as saying he submits to our understanding of justice, but God is not unjust. And he judges people according to what they know. "To whom much is given," Jesus says, "much will be required." But, of course, all people know God. Romans 1 says, "What can be known about God is plain to us." And that doesn't mean, though, that some don't know more. I mean, you listening probably know more about the true God than many people in the world. And, of course, that means you're accountable for that greater knowledge. But all people know God. Romans 1 specifically says this makes everyone without excuse. And yet verse 30 says, "The Lord will judge his people." And Peter says judgment begins with the household of God. How does what I've just said help us understand that? Well, "to whom much is given, much is required." If everyone is without excuse, how much more is that true of those in the church? We get the blessing of being set apart by baptism, of hearing God's word week after week, of participating in the Lord's supper, of enjoying the fellowship of Christ's body, the church. Now, if you're a part of this body, and yet you still reject the gospel, "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

But of course, if you're found in Christ, if you look at the work of our great high priest and believe in him, as the hymn says, "No condemnation now I dread; Jesus and all in him is mine!" Why? Because Jesus bore our punishment. He was held accountable for you and me. And, in this sense, judgment really did begin at the household of God because judgment began at the cross. See, at the cross God began to judge His people. He laid all the judgment for all the sins of all his people on the head and representative of his people, Jesus Christ.

Remember, the whole point of this passage is, "Don't neglect the truth of Jesus as our great high priest." The heart, even of the warning, is the gospel. And there's a danger not just for people outside the church to do that, but there's a danger for people inside the church—people who have grown up in the church, people who have heard the gospel—to actually neglect it, to not believe it.

But Jesus has faced judgment. Our sins have been returned on his head. And the irony of the cross is: Jesus, in order to defeat his and our enemies, is seemingly defeated by them, and in order to give us life he tastes death. So while there are dire warnings to those who reject the gospel, that doesn't need to be you. It doesn't need to be me. Because whether you are in the church or out of it, the path forward is the same. As Paul says, simply "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household." Cling to Jesus, rest in him, look to him, persevere in faith. Grow in your faith, grow your faith week after week as you read God's word, as you spend time with his people, as you turn to Him in prayer. And then it's not that you can't have assurance. It's that your assurance will be properly placed. It'll be placed in the work of our great high priest, Jesus Christ.

Let's rest in him, and let's pray.

Our Father, we do pray that you would grow us in assurance that is properly placed, assurance found in the work of our great high priest, Jesus Christ. Help us to heed the warnings of this passage and not neglect the gospel, but to cling to Jesus with all our hearts. We know that even that we cannot do in our own strength and so we thank you for the gift of your Spirit, and we pray that you would fill us with your Spirit more and more, day by day, that we would cling to Jesus and rest in him. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen