

# HOLY HELP FOR THE HOPELESS WHO REMAIN LOYAL TO CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

## Hebrews 10:26-31

*Please review this week's catechism question and pray for the missionary family your group has adopted.*

### INTRODUCTION

Describe ways fear of something bad happening to you has motivated you to do something good or beneficial or to stop doing something bad or harmful. Is fear sometimes a good motivator in your life? When would fear be a bad motivator?

I think we all know that fear can be a good and powerful motivator. God himself uses fear in our passage this morning to both stop bad believing and behaving and to encourage good believing and behaving. In the original language our passage begins and ends with the word fear. In v. 27, all who continue to deliberately sin have set before them a "fearful expectation of judgment" and in v. 31 "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." The entire passage is designed to strike fear into our hearts and thus to motivate us to do what is right and to not do what is wrong. This strong warning is located in this place because of what the author has just said. In vv. 19-25 he describes the ultimate result of the work of Jesus. Jesus did all that he did in order to create a community of people who draw near to God in worship, who together hold fast to the hope of living with God forever and who pay careful attention to one another for the purpose of provoking one another to love and good works. In other words, Jesus did all that he did to create the church. This letter was written to these people because they were under pressure to abandon Christ and his church. In v.25 we discovered for the first time that the defection has already begun (note; "as some are in the habit of doing."). Thus, the author places this warning here to terrify those who yet remain so that they will remain faithful to Christ and his church and to urge those who have left to return.

### STUDY

1. According to v. 26, to who is this warning addressed?

*It is not addressed to every human being but to a particular group of human beings. It is not addressed to all human beings who willingly sin, which is every human being, but to a particular portion of sinning human beings. The people to whom this warning applies are, first of all, "we who have received a knowledge of the truth." Clearly this refers to every professing Christian, including the author of this letter. Every person who claims to be a Christian and who is right now vitally connected to a local church make up this group described here as "we who have received the knowledge of the truth." However, there is an important qualifier added to this description. The threats contained in this warning are addressed to every member of every local church who is "deliberately continuing to sin."*

2. According to the context, both what precedes in v. 25 and what follows in v. 29, what does the author mean by "those who deliberately (or willingly) continue to sin"? (NOTE: the first word of v. 26 is the word "for". Not translated in the NIV.)

*In the immediate context you can see what this "deliberately continuing to sin" is referring to. First, the first word in v. 27 is the word "for". It is an absolutely key word. The logic of the author in vv. 19-26 is this: we are to continue to draw near to God in corporate worship and we are to hold fast to our hope together and we are to not stop meeting together but we are to encourage one another daily because if we don't do these things we are "deliberately continuing to sin after receiving the knowledge of the truth" and thus the threatened calamities will be true for us. In the context he is specifically referring to that group of people in v. 25 who are in the habit of not meeting with the church anymore. This is the "deliberate sin" to which he refers. He is not talking about people who skip a worship service or who don't go to a small group bible study. As Calvin says in his commentary, "Those who sin, mentioned by the author are not such as offend in any way, but such as forsake the church and wholly alienate themselves from Christ." He is talking about people who renounce their allegiance to Christ and so stop associating with his church. These are people who were once vitally involved members of a local church, fully convinced of the truth of the gospel but who due to the*

*threat of persecution or weariness in resisting sin or desire for some earthly pleasure openly reject Christ and therefore their association with the body of Christ. In leaving the church the author is saying that they are also leaving Jesus behind. This does not necessarily mean that every person who has gotten out of the habit of going to church is in this category. However, the author is making a very strong connection between vital union with a local church and vital union with Christ and so those who once were vitally connected to a local church but who now are not should beware. You are on a dangerous road if you are not vitally connected to a local church.*

*Verse 29 confirms that this deliberate, ongoing sin is a conscious, knowledgeable renunciation of Christ and his church, not merely a passive "I got out of the habit of going to church" or "I yelled at my children today." There are three clauses describing what the people who are in the habit of not showing up at church gatherings are actually doing. First, they are trampling underfoot the Son of God. These are people who at one time affirmed everything that is said about Jesus in this letter. But now, they trample Jesus under their feet. They treat him like the dirt under their feet. They are as indifferent to him as to the pavement they walk upon. He is contemptible to them; a nothing and a nobody. Second, not only do they treat Jesus, the Son of God, with contempt but they treat his blood, his suffering, his death on the cross with contempt. They treat Christ's blood as if it is unfit for God. They claim that God himself treats the blood of Jesus like an unclean thing. Don't miss the steep irony. This blood that they treat as unholy is the very thing that makes sinful humans holy and by which at one time they claimed to have been made holy. Finally, they insult the Spirit of grace. What a marvelous description of the Holy Spirit. Contrary to what we deserve the HS gives us new hearts, cleanses our hearts from a conscience of evil, puts God's mark of ownership on us, comforts us through all the troubles of this life and at the end, raises us from the dead. He is indeed the Spirit who gives us the unmerited and unearned kindness of God. At one time these people all claimed to be the recipients of his gracious work but now they insult the Spirit. They assert that their work of obedience is far superior to the work of God the Spirit. This is true for everyone who abandons Christ. We insult the Spirit who gives us God's grace by insisting that our work is superior and more reliable than his.*

3. What is the significance of the author using the term "we"?

*The fact that the author says "we" indicates not that he thinks he is committing these deliberate sins but that he recognizes that he, as a member of the visible church, potentially could engage in these deliberate sins. This warning is for him as much as it for them.*

4. Those who teach that true Christians can lose their salvation use the clause in v. 29, "by which he was sanctified (made holy)" to show that the author is talking about true Christians who forsake Christ and go to hell. On what grounds would we say that this clause cannot be identifying a true Christian but rather a professing Christian, that is, a person who appears to be and claims to be a Christian but is not?

*Just in chapter 10 the author has made several statements indicating that salvation is a work of sovereign grace and not dependent upon us. In 10:10 he said it was by the will of God that we have been made holy by the sacrifice of Christ. Both the perfect past tense and the fact that it was God's will we be made holy show that the holiness that God gives cannot be taken away. 10:14 says we have been made perfect forever by the sacrifice of Christ. It's hard to imagine how the word forever could apply if we can lose our salvation. Finally, in v. 16 he quotes the portion from the NC statement in Jeremiah that emphasizes that it is the work of God to put his laws in our hearts and write them on our minds. Again, it is his work, not ours and God cannot fail to complete what he starts. We are to understand the clause, "by which he was sanctified" in its experiential reference as in v. 14, which uses the same verb. It is true that professing Christians, who are vitally connected to the church are the beneficiaries of the work of the HS in the church which makes those in it holy. It appears that false Christians are being made holy. Most false Christians exhibit a level of "holiness" that masks the fact that they are not truly converted. Like the seed that fell on rocky soil or thorny soil that grows for a time but then because of persecution or trouble or the deception of wealth or the worries of the world they fall away. Judas exhibited enough Christian character that none of the disciples had any idea he was going to betray them. Jesus said that false teachers are wolves dressed in sheep's clothing. Paul told the Ephesian elders that from*

*their own number false teachers would arise in order to try to lead disciples away from Christ.*

5. How does it make you feel that you could potentially be one who “deliberately continues to sin”, in this manner?
6. How can the author say at the end of v. 26 that “no sacrifice for sins remains?” What does he mean by this? Compare to 6:4-6.

*This is very similar language to chapter 6 where we were told that those who reject Christ in this way cannot be renewed in their repentance. In the same way, if you knowingly reject Christ and cut yourself off from his church then you are cutting yourself off from the only possible way to escape your sins and to gain heaven. The entire argument of the central chapters of this letter is that only Jesus is a sufficient sacrifice for sins. In fact, 10:18 says in almost the exact language that because sins are forgiven through the sacrifice of Christ there can be no other sacrifice made to gain forgiveness. The reason there is no other sacrifice is because Christ’s sacrifice is the only perfect sacrifice. Therefore, if you, knowing this about Jesus and having assented to its truthfulness in the fellowship of the church now reject Jesus and all he has done, and abandon the church where Christ and his work is experienced in baptism and communion and in the word and in the fellowship of the saints, then there is no other possible sacrifice available to you. You are on your own. You will have to stand in front of God, your judge by yourself and give an answer to him. You will have to explain why he should let you into heaven based on who you are and what you have done.*

7. Do you think it is possible to know when another person has crossed the line so that you could say about him or her: “no sacrifice for sins remains?” Why or why not? How should you respond to those who appear to be heading in that direction?

8. Verse 27 is an allusion to Leviticus 10:1-3 and Numbers 16, especially v. 35. Why does the author allude to these events? (NOTE: the term translated “raging” in the NIV and “fury” in the ESV is the Greek word for “zeal” or “jealousy”.) Compare to Isaiah 26:10-11.

*Verse 27 is a clear reference to the fire of God that came out from the tabernacle and consumed the two sons of Aaron: Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10) who ignored God's command to only use one kind of incense when approaching him. It is also a clear reference to God's fire consuming the 250 Levites who allied themselves with Dathan and Korah in their rebellion against Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16). In both cases people who were fully informed of God's covenant and who had participated in the cleansing rituals of the tabernacle deliberately rose up against God and treated him and his servants Moses and Aaron with contempt and thus the fire of God's jealousy burned them up. In both cases these were priests and Levites. The word that is translated "raging" in the NIV and "fury" in the ESV is the word for jealousy or zeal. While the word is not directly used in the case of Aaron's sons you can hear the idea in God's explanation for why he burned them up: "Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be glorified." The idea is that God is jealous for the glory that is due to him alone and when people spurn him and his grace his jealous anger is provoked and it becomes a fire that consumes his adversaries. Aaron's sons deliberately sinned in the face of overwhelming evidence of God's grace and will. God's jealous anger throughout the OT is aroused by those to whom he has been gracious but who then turn to other gods, who deliberately reject him and his grace. With the coming of Christ, the adversaries of God in this passage, are all who have confessed Christ in the fellowship of the church and then turn their backs on the church and on Christ.*

9. In v. 28 the author uses language borrowed from Deuteronomy 13:1-9 (In the NIV, “show no pity” in Deuteronomy = “without mercy” in Hebrews) and 17:2-7 (“on the testimony of two or three witnesses”). What do these two passages share in common and why does the author connect his argument here to these passages?

*Notice that in chapter 13 God is describing the defection of Israelites from the worship of the true God to worshipping idols. Here are people who deliberately turn their back on the God who has delivered them from Egypt and cared for them in the wilderness and given them the land of Canaan. The God of grace is rejected and the worship of the true God at the tabernacle is replaced by worshipping false gods at altars and locations scattered throughout the land. Notice in vv. 6-8 that even if your own family*

member is the one who urges you to abandon God you are to show no pity but you are to turn him or her over to the community to be stoned and you are to throw the first stone. That word pity is the same word used in Hebrews 10:28, "they die without mercy." Then look over at chapter 17. Again the context is any Israelite, any member of the covenant community, bowing down in worship of false gods. If anyone is found to be doing this he or she is to be stoned. But notice v. 6. This can only happen on the basis of two or three witnesses, which is quoted in 10:28. So the author compares those who turn away from the church and from Christ and in the case of the Hebrews, returned to the Jewish synagogue, with those Israelites who worshipped false gods in the OT. But his main point of contrast is this: if people were killed for doing this in the OT and they were only turning away from a shadow, a copy of heaven, then how much worse punishment do you think is deserved by those who turn from Christ and his church which is the real deal? If this is how God reacted in the OT how do you think he will react to you if you desert Christ?

**10.** What is the "worse punishment" deserved by those who abandon Christ and his church? Compare Luke 12:4-5.

*There is a fate far worse than mere death. Death is nothing compared to the jealous fire of God's wrath that will be poured out on all who turn from Jesus. The author to the Hebrews is not alone in the NT to describe this wrath. Jesus himself said to his disciples in a context in which he is exhorting them not to be hypocrites. He says, "Do not fear those who can only kill the body. I will tell you whom you should fear. Fear him who after the killing of the body has the power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!" Eternal, conscious punishment in hell is worse than death.*

**11.** In v. 30 he quotes two lines from Deuteronomy 32:35-36 to prove his point that God will punish those who abandon Christ more severely. Why should we expect God to punish those who abandon Christ more severely? Why is it a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God?

*Deuteronomy 32 is Moses final song to the nation of Israel. It basically says that while God has been so kind to them and done so much for them he, Moses, knows that they are not going to do what God has said and thus God is going to destroy them. He will take his vengeance on these people who have been given so much but who have rejected him and his worship. It is God's nature to defend the honor of his name, to deal justly with all human*

*beings. He cannot be bribed. He does not play favorites. He will give to everyone exactly what they deserve. For those who are outside of Christ it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. To stand before God without Christ is to stand before a perfect judge who is jealous for the glory due to him as one who has spurned that glory. If you are one who at one time professed faith in Christ and who demonstrated your faith in the company of the church, God's anger will burn brighter and hotter against you because it is always true: "To whom much is given, much will be required." All who have sinned against the glory of God in ignorance of Christ and the gospel will go to hell because they willfully ignored the overwhelming display of God's glory in creation but those who turn against a full and complete revelation of the glory and grace of God in Christ can expect terrible judgment to be poured out upon them.*

**12.** Do you ever fear God? Do you think a Christian should fear God? Why or why not?

*There is a level of complexity to the emotional life of Christians in their relationship to God. While it is true, as the apostle John says in his first letter that God's "perfect love for us drives out fear," yet there must be a place in our hearts for a real fear of God. There can be no doubt that this is the aim of this author. In the last part of this chapter he is going to tell these people that he is confident they have a genuine faith and yet he does not hesitate to use such fear provoking language. So while we must find rest for our hearts in the sufficiency of Christ and his love for sinners, yet we must also fear his wrath against all who reject his grace and this fear must be part of what motivates us to hold fast to Christ. It is this fear that should motivate us to admonish one another to fight sin and pursue Christ.*

**13.** Are there any ways that fear of God is motivating your attitudes or actions?

**We must remain faithful to Jesus by remaining faithful to his church because...**

- **Rejecting the church is rejecting Christ**
- **Rejecting Christ permanently excludes us from the benefits of Christ's ministry**
- **There is a fate worse than death**

