**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**Hebrews (31): The Book Of Better Things**

**“The Tragic Plight of the Apostate”**

**Hebrews 10:26-31**

**January 19, 2025**

If you have been born again for any length of time, you probably know there are two kinds of unsaved “Christians.” The first group is the CEO’s. They are “Christians” on Christmas and Easter Only. That’s the only time they ever show up to church. If it weren’t for those two days of the year, we’d never see them. But we pray for them, and witness to them, because there’s always hope that God will save them.

But that’s not true of the second group of unsaved “Christians.” These people used to be in a Bible believing church. Many of them made a profession of faith and were baptized in water. They may have been part of a worship team, or the praise band, or involved in the leadership of their church. Some may have even gone to Bible College or a theological seminary. They once were Sunday School teachers and youth pastors.

But then something happened. The trials and troubles and temptations that came their way proved to be too much. Gradually, over time, they turned away from the church and rejected everything they said they once believed. Now they live the way they *want* to live, for they no longer believe the Bible is the authoritative Word of God. Many adamantly reject the truth that Jesus Christ is God’s eternal Son. What’s even worse, they treat His atoning death on the cross with utter contempt.

In the verses before us today, our author is warning his readers *not* to go down that path. For anyone who has once professed faith in Christ, but then repudiates that profession, does so at his or her own peril. They run the real risk of passing the point of no return. That’s the tragic plight of the *apostate*. Once they cross that line, it is impossible for them to be brought back to repentance (Heb. 6:4-6). For them, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins (Heb. 10:26). Apostates cannot be saved.

There is no better illustration of this than the one we find in Pilgrim’s Progress. It’s an illustration I’ve used in a previous message, one which bears repeating. It’s the story of what happens when Christian arrives at the House of the Interpreter. His host leads him on a tour of his house, room by room. Toward the end of the tour, they enter a very dark room where a man sat in an iron cage. Here’s how Bunyan tells it:

“*Now to look at him, the man seemed very sad; he sat with his eyes looking down to the ground, his hands folded together, and he sighed as if his heart was breaking. Christian asked, ‘What does this mean?’ Interpreter told him to talk with the man. Then Christian asked him, ‘Who are you?’ The man answered, ‘I am what I once was not.’ ‘What were you before?’ The man answered, ‘At one time I was a man who professed Christ and whose faith was pure and growing, not only in my own eyes but also in the eyes of others. I was, so I thought, fit for the Celestial City and even felt joy when I thought of my arrival there.’*

*‘Well, what are you now?’ ‘I am a man of despair, and I am locked up in it as I am in this iron cage. I cannot get out. Oh, I cannot. ‘But how did you get into this condition?’ ‘I ceased to watch and be sober. I allowed myself to be driven by my lusts, and I sinned against the light of the word and the goodness of God. I have grieved the Holy Spirit, and He is gone from me; I allowed an opening for the devil, and he has come to me; I have provoked God to anger, and He has left me. I have so hardened my heart that I cannot repent.*

*‘But can you not now repent and turn around?’ ‘God has denied me repentance. His word gives me no encouragement to believe. Yes, he has shut me up in this Cage, and not all the men in the world can free me. Oh, eternity, eternity, how will I ever bear the misery that I must face in eternity?’*

*Then Interpreter looked at Christian and gave him this charge: ‘Remember this man’s misery and let it be a caution to you forever.’ ‘Well, this is frightening!’ Christian responded. ‘God help me to watch and be sober and to pray that I may shun what caused this man’s misery.’”*

That’s the danger the author of Hebrews is warning against in this passage of Scripture (10:26-31). It’s the fourth of five warnings within this letter. In the first warning, the author addressed the danger of *drifting* from the Word (2:1-4). In the second, he addressed the danger of *doubting* the Word (3:7-4:13). In the third, he addressed the danger of becoming *dull of hearing* the Word (5:11-6:20). In this fourth warning, he addresses the danger of *despising* the Word (10:26-31).

Each time the language intensifies, but the consequence is always the same. The *only* future for an apostate is the “frightful expectation” of God’s wrath and eternal damnation. An apostate is no garden variety, plain vanilla, ordinary non-Christian, for whom there is still hope. An apostate cannot be saved. That’s not because God is unable to save him; it’s because God refuses to save him.

Our starting point is the little word “For” with which verse 26 begins (as reflected in the ESV): “*For* if we go on sinning after deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth . . .” This tells us *why* there is such urgency to “*not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing* . . .” (v. 25). The *reason* our author exhorts us to stir up one another to love and good works is precisely because assembling together is the means to keep us on the right path and to help us from falling away or apostatizing. What then follows is the warning, which naturally falls into three parts:

**A. The Nature and Consequences of Apostasy (10:26-27):** “*For if we deliberately go 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 a raging fire that will consume the enemies of God*” (NIV). There are several characteristics of an apostate that must be noted.

**(1)** Our author’s concern is *not* a one-time, single act of unbelief or rebellion. To “*go on sinning deliberately*” means there may be some who *persistently* continue to willfully rebel against God and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The issue is *not* occasional lapses in our faith, but rather hardhearted, calloused rebellion that settles in over time.

**(2)** Such people commit this sin “*after receiving the knowledge of the truth* . . .” They understand the gospel message, and at one time professed to believe it. But like the seed that falls on rocky places, an apostate “*hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But* *since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away*.” (Matt. 13:20-21) There are many people in our churches today who hear and understand and give mental assent to the truth of the gospel, *without* placing their *personal* trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. That’s who’s in view here; a non-Christian who once claimed to be a Christian.

**(3)** The consequences of this persistent, willful repudiation of Christ are explained in several ways: **(a)** “*no sacrifice for sins is left* . . .” (v. 26). This doesn’t mean that the atoning death of Christ is ineffective in removing the guilt of sin. It means that once an apostate turns his back on Christ, and repudiates the *only* sacrifice available to him, there is no other sacrifice that can help him. Once he willfully cuts himself off from the sole means of forgiveness, he can’t come back (Cf. 6:4-6) – and he won’t find a sacrifice anywhere else that can atone for his guilt; **(b)** there is a “*only a fearful expectation of judgment*” (v. 27a). The question for *us* is whether we have the courage and conviction to explain this to those who once professed faith in Christ but have since turned from Him. Or do we turn a blind eye to their rebellion and pretend that all is well? **(c)** This divine judgment is “*a fury of fire that will consume God’s enemies*” (v. 27b). In the Old Testament the term “fire” is always descriptive of God’s retributive judgment (Cf. Ps. 79:5-6; Isa. 26:11; Zeph. 1:18; 3:8). It prefigures the eternal “*lake of fire”* that awaits the unrighteous at the end of the age (Rev. 20:11-15). Make no mistake about it – hell is real.

**B. The Confirmation of the Fate of the Apostates (10:28-29):** “*Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace*?” We have seen this argument before (the “how much more” argument of 2:2-3; 9:13-14). It’s the argument from the lesser (the law) to the greater (the gospel). As we have seen, Jesus is greater than Moses (3:1ff), and the new covenant is better than the old (8:1ff), since it’s founded on better promises (8:6) and inaugurated by a better sacrifice (9:23).

Here, then, is the author’s argument: under the Mosaic law, the death penalty was reserved for those who blasphemed God or who worshipped other gods (Lev. 24:13-16; Deut. 17:2-7). The apostate was to be stoned to death, as long as the sin was clearly established by two or three witnesses. Therefore, if the penalty for apostasy under the Old Covenant was physical death, then how much more severe a penalty awaits those who repudiate and turn their backs on Christ (spiritual death).

There are three counts in the indictment against the apostate: **(1)** he has “*trampled the Son of God underfoot*.” This implies not only rejecting Christ but also despising Him. It’s to say that the Christ who died for sinners is worthless, on the same level as garbage that we would consciously crush under our feet; **(2)** he has “*treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him* . . .” That implies that there’s nothing special about the blood that He shed – the death of the Lord Jesus Christ is no different than any other human being. **(3)** he has “*insulted the Spirit of grace*.” It’s as if he or she has spit in the face of the living God and dishonored and disrespected everything we know to be true about the Holy Spirit. This is no ordinary, plain vanilla, garden variety non-Christian! An apostate defiantly renounces Christ and the community of faith (Cf. 6:4-8).

**Q.** But what exactly does our author mean when he says that such a person was “sanctified” by the blood of the covenant? **A.** He doesn’t mean that apostates were once saved. He means they were externally “set apart” from the world and identified with the visible church, by virtue of their profession of faith in Christ. They came under the influence of God’s Word, sang songs of praise, and partook of the Lord’s Supper, and participated in the communion of the saints. They were the recipients of numerous spiritual blessings and enjoyed the incredible privilege of joining with Christians in their worship services. In that sense they were “sanctified.” But they weren’t saved. How do we know this? Because the proof of saving faith is persevering faith (Cf. Heb. 3:6, 14). Hence their apostasy is proof that they were never saved in the first place.

**C. The Certainty of the Apostate’s Condemnation (10:30-31):** “*For we know him who said, ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay’* (Deut. 32:35). *And again, ‘The Lord will judge his people’* (Deut. 32:36). *It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*.”

One of the problems today is that people are so hardened and calloused that they have no fear of impending judgment. In the words of the psalmist, “*There is no fear of God before their eyes*” (Ps. 36:1; Cf. Rom. 3:18). They *persist* in their denunciation and mockery of Jesus Christ, thinking there won’t be any accountability for what they say or do.

But an apostate should know better. He (and we) should know that the living God is not only a God of love and mercy; He’s a God of righteous wrath. Anyone who rejects and repudiates Christ can *only* expect the outpouring of His vengeance. To fall into the hands of the living God *is* truly dreadful. Why? Because our author is talking about hell; Eternal condemnation; Separation *forever* from the presence of the living God. That’s why!

Some of us are familiar with Chick Publications. Their gospel tracts come with graphic illustrations. They catch everyone’s attention. They are straightforward and hard hitting. They pull no punches. They tell us there is only one way to heaven and one way to hell. The way to heaven is to repent and receive Christ; the way to hell is to repudiate and reject Christ. Most important of all, these tracts picture hell as the everlasting lake of fire. It’s where the unsaved will suffer eternal torment along with the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:11-15). It’s a sobering picture of the second death that awaits those whose names are not written in the Book of Life (Rev. 20:15).

**Q.** How, then, should we respond to these verses? **A.** By praising God for His sovereign grace that has made it possible for us to be spared this wrath. God’s wrath was fully poured out on Christ and is forever satisfied for those who place their trust in Him as Lord and Savior. We can praise Him as well that we are saved by persevering faith, *and* that He is the one who keeps us persevering! We can rejoice that whatever God starts, He finishes! Thus we can sing, “Hallelujah! What a Savior! Hallelujah! What a Friend! Saving, helping, keeping, loving, he is with me to the end.”