



Talmid תלמיד a Hebrew word that means “a true disciple who desires to be what the Rabbi Jesus is.”

Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did. 1 John 2:6 (NIV)

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STUDY TO SHEW THYSELF APPROVED UNTO GOD, A WORKMAN THAT NEEDETH NOT TO BE ASHAMED, RIGHTLY
DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH. 2 TIMOTHY 2:15



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The Doctrines of Grace

Humanity's Radical Corruption

Total depravity is the first of Calvinism's famous five points. It is somewhat unfortunate that the doctrine is called “**total depravity**” because this name can be misleading. It has prevailed because it fits the familiar acrostic **TULIP**. Total depravity makes up the **(T)** of **TULIP**. The term is misleading because it suggests a moral condition of *utter depravity*. *Utter depravity* means a person is as wicked as he can possibly be. *Utter* suggests both total and complete corruption, lacking even in civil virtue.

The doctrine of total depravity, however, does not teach that man is as wicked as he could possibly be. For example, Adolf Hitler, who often serves as the paradigm of human evil, surely had some behavioral patterns that were not utterly base. Perhaps Hitler loved his mother and at times was even kind to her (a hypothesis that may not fit the likes of Nero).

Table 1 The TULIP's First Petal

1. **Total depravity**
Humanity's radical corruption
2. **Unconditional election**
God's sovereign choice
3. **Limited atonement**
Christ's purposeful atonement
4. **Irresistible grace**
The Spirit's effective call
5. **Perseverance of the saints**
God's preservation of the saints

The term *total depravity*, as distinguished from *utter depravity*, refers to the effect of sin and corruption on the whole person. To be totally depraved is to suffer from corruption that pervades the whole person. Sin affects every aspect of our being: the body, the soul, the mind, the will, and so forth. The total or whole person is corrupted by sin. No vestigial “**island of righteousness**” escapes the influence of the fall. Sin reaches into every aspect of our lives, finding no shelter of isolated virtue.

Perhaps a better term for the doctrine

of total depravity would be *radical corruption*. The word *radical* derives from the Latin *radix*, which means “**root**.” To say that mankind is radically corrupt is to say that sin penetrates to the root or core of our being. Sin is not tangential or peripheral, but arises from the center of our being. It flows from what the Bible calls the “**heart**,” which does not refer to the muscle that pumps blood throughout our bodies but to the “**core**” of our being. Even the word core derives from the Latin word for “**heart**.”

Jesus frequently described this condition with images drawn from nature. Just as a corrupt tree yields corrupt fruit, so sin flows out of a corrupt human nature. We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners. Since the fall human nature has been corrupt. We are born with a sin nature. Our acts of sin flow out of this corrupted nature.

The Apostle Paul, citing the Old Testament, summarizes the universal condition of sin:

“What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin..... As it is written ” (Romans 3:9-10 (NASB)).

Psalm 14:1-3 (NASB)

¹ The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; There is no one who does good.

² The LORD has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men To see if there are any who understand, Who seek after God.

³ They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; There is no one who does good, not even one.

Psalm 53:1-3 (NASB)

¹ The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God," They are corrupt, and have committed abominable injustice; There is no one who does good.

² God has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men To see if there is anyone who understands, Who seeks after God.

³ Every one of them has turned aside; together they have become corrupt; There is no one who does good, not even one.

Ecclesiastes 7:20 (NASB)

²⁰ Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who *continually* does good and who never sins.

Psalm 5:9 (NASB)

⁹ There is nothing reliable in what they say; Their inward part is destruction *itself*. Their throat is an open grave; They flatter with their tongue.

Psalm 140:3 (NASB)

³ They sharpen their tongues as a serpent; Poison of a viper is under their lips. Selah.

Psalm 10:7 (NASB)

⁷ His mouth is full of curses and deceit and oppression; Under his tongue is mischief and wickedness.

Isaiah 59:7-8 (NASB)

⁷ Their feet run to evil, And they hasten to shed innocent blood; Their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity, Devastation and destruction are in their highways.

⁸ They do not know the way of peace, And there is no justice in their tracks; They have made their paths crooked, Whoever treads on them does not know peace.

Psalm 36:1 (NASB)

¹ Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart; There is no fear of God before his eyes.

Romans 3:9-18 (NASB)

⁹ What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin;

¹⁰ as it is written, "THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;

¹¹ THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;
¹² ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE."

¹³ "THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE, WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING," "THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS";

¹⁴ "WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS";

¹⁵ **"THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD,**
¹⁶ **DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS,**
¹⁷ **AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN."**
¹⁸ **"THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES."**

Here the apostle speaks of our being **"under sin."** We use figurative language with respect to human conditions. We say a diligent person is **"on top of"** his work, which means he has it under control. Conversely to be **"under"** things is to be under their control. When Paul speaks of our being under sin, he is using the same sort of language. To be under sin is to be controlled by our sin nature. Sin is a weight or burden that presses downward on the soul.

In bringing the whole human race before the tribunal of God, Scripture indicts us all without exception, save for Jesus. It says, **"There is none righteous, not even one."** The qualifying phrase, **"not even one,"** makes it clear that the universal judgment is not hyperbole. It is a universal negative proposition, from which none are excluded. The absence of exclusions or exceptions is not technically absolute when we consider the sinlessness of Jesus. This text, however, does not have Jesus in his moral uniqueness in view. It is evaluating the entire human race apart from Jesus.

The text then moves in a remarkable way from the general to the specific. Not only does it say there is none righteous, but it says there is none who does good, no, not one. We are not considered unrighteous because the dross of sin is mixed together with our goodness. The indictment against us is more radical: in our corrupt humanity we never do a single good thing.

How are we to understand this? Is it not our daily experience that many good deeds are performed by pagan people? The Reformers wrestled with this problem and acknowledged that sinners in their fallen condition are still capable of performing what the Reformers called works of **"civil virtue."** Civil virtue refers to deeds that conform outwardly to the law of God.

Fallen sinners can refrain from stealing and perform acts of charity, but these deeds are not deemed good in an ultimate sense. When God evaluates the actions of people, he considers not only the outward deeds in and of themselves, but also the motives behind these acts. The supreme motive required of everything we do is the love of God. A deed that outwardly conforms to God's law but proceeds from a heart alienated from God is not deemed by God a good deed. The whole action, including the inclinations of the doer's heart, is brought under the scrutiny of God and found wanting.

Jonathan Edwards said civic virtue is motivated by **"enlightened self-interest."**

Such outwardly virtuous acts are motivated, not by a desire to please or honor God, but by a desire to protect our own interests. We may learn, for example, that there are circumstances where crime does not pay. We may obey legal speed limits to avoid a speeding ticket. We are restrained from sinning to our full potential by law, culture, and the prospect of conflict with other sinful people. On the positive side, we might even do **"virtuous"** deeds, but we are motivated by a desire for the applause of others. Here the opposite assumption, that certain **"virtues"** actually pay in this world, plays a role. Absent in both cases is the motive of a heartfelt love for God.

ORIGINAL SIN

The condition of radical corruption, or total depravity, is the fallen state known as original sin. The doctrine of original sin does not refer to the first sin committed by Adam and Eve, but to the result of that first sin. Original sin is the corruption visited on the progeny of our first parents as punishment for the original transgression. Virtually every Christian church has some doctrine of original sin. Though liberal theology, deeply influenced by humanistic assumptions, often decries original sin, all the historic confessions include the doctrine. To be sure, the degree of corruption involved with original sin has been a perennial point of debate among theologians. The consensus of historic Christianity, nevertheless, is that the biblical view of the fall requires us to affirm some concept of original sin.

One of the most volatile controversies of the fourth century involved the doctrine of original sin. The combatants were the famous **Bishop of Hippo, Aurelius Augustine**, and the monk **Pelagius**. Pelagius took of-

fense at **Augustine's** famous prayer, "**Grant what thou commandest, and command what thou dost desire.**"¹

Pelagius disagreed that it is in any way necessary for God to "**grant**" what he commands of us. **Pelagius** assumed that moral responsibility always carries with it moral ability. It would be unjust of God to require his creatures to do what they are unable to do in their own power. If God requires moral perfection, then mankind must be able to achieve perfection. Though grace facilitates our quest for moral perfection, grace is not necessary for us to reach it.

Augustine argued that grace not only facilitates our efforts to obey God, but because of our fallen nature, grace is necessary. Before the fall, the requirement for moral perfection was already present. The fall did not change the requirement, but it did change us. What was once a moral possibility became, without grace, a moral impossibility. **Augustine's** view is rooted in his doctrine of original sin. As the debate escalated, **Pelagius** aimed his guns at this doctrine.

Denying original sin, **Pelagius** argued that human nature was created not only good, but incontrovertibly good. Human nature can be modified, but the modifications can be only "**accidental,**" not "**essential.**" This terminology again reflects **Aristotelian** categories, whereby the word accidental does not mean "**unintentional**" but refers to changes that affect only the surface of something, not its deepest essence. Sin does not change our essential moral nature. We may sin, but we remain "**basically good.**"

Let me mention parenthetically that the idea of mankind's basic goodness is a cardinal tenet of humanistic philosophy. It also pervades modern American evangelicalism if recent polls are at all accurate. In a Gallup Poll the overwhelming majority of professing evangelicals indicated their agreement with the proposition that people are "**basically good.**"

At the heart of **Pelagius's** concern in his debate with **Augustine** was a desire to protect the idea of man's free will. Man both obeys God and sins against him according to the activity of a free will.

Adam was given free will, and his will was not affected by the fall. Nor was guilt or fallen corruption transmitted to Adam's progeny. According to **Pelagius**, Adam's sin affected Adam and Adam alone. There is no inherited condition of corruption known as original sin. Man's will remains entirely free and retains the capacity for indifference, meaning it is not predisposed or inclined toward evil. All men are born free of any predisposition to sin. We are all born in the same moral condition as Adam enjoyed before the fall.

Augustine, on the other hand, argued that sin is universal and that mankind is a "**mass of sin**" (**massa peccati**). Man is incapable of elevating himself to the good without the work of God's grace within. We can no more return ourselves to God than an empty vessel can refill itself with water.

Augustine is famous for distinguishing various moral states or conditions of man both prior to the fall and after it. Before the fall Adam had the ability to sin (**posse peccare**) and the ability not to sin (**posse non peccare**). He did not possess the inability to sin (**non posse peccare**) or the inability not to sin (**non posse non peccare**).

We struggle a bit with this language because the last condition, which describes **Augustine's** view of original sin, is spelled out with a double negative, "**non posse non peccare.**" To say that fallen man is unable not to sin means that we are able only to sin. We simply are unable to live without sinning. We sin out of a kind of moral necessity because we act according to our fallen nature. We do corrupt things because we are corrupt people. This is the essence of what it means to be fallen.

Table 2 **Augustine on Human Ability**

Before the fall

The ability not to sin and the ability to sin.

After the fall

The inability not to sin.

John Calvin followed **Augustine** in this view of human corruption: "This is the hereditary corruption to which early Christian writers gave the name of **Original Sin**, meaning by the term the depravation of a nature formerly good and pure.-.-.- when it was clearly proved from Scripture that the sin of the first man passed to all

his posterity, recourse was had to the cavil, that it passed by imitation, and not by propagation. The orthodox, therefore, and more especially **Augustine**, labored to show, that we are not corrupted by acquired wickedness, but bring an innate corruption from the very womb.”²

The issue of innate corruption spawned the controversy between **Pelagius** and **Augustine**. **Pelagius** was condemned at the **Synod of Carthage in 418**. Subsequent church councils reaffirmed the doctrine of original sin and repeated the denunciation of **Pelagius’s** teaching. Even the **Council of Trent** in the sixteenth century made it clear that **Pelagianism** seriously distorts the biblical view of the fall.

Martin Luther wrote this about original sin: “According to the apostle and the simple sense of him who is in Christ Jesus, it is not merely the lack of a quality in the will or indeed merely the lack of light in the intellect, of strength in the memory. Rather it is a complete deprivation of all rectitude and of the ability of all the powers of the body as well as the soul and of the entire inner and outer man. In addition to this, it is an inclination to evil, a disgust at the good, a disinclination toward light and wisdom; it is love of error and darkness, a fleeing from good works and a loathing of them, a running to what is evil.-.-.”³

The apostle of whom **Luther** speaks is Paul. Perhaps **Luther** had Romans in mind when he made this statement. In **Romans 3:11** Paul declares, “**There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God.**” On the surface this is a startling judgment.

The Bible frequently admonishes people to seek after God, yet it also teaches that in our fallen state none of us in fact does seek after God. The basic posture of unregenerate man is that of a fugitive. Our natural inclination is to flee from God. The first sin in Eden provoked the first flight from his presence, a flight to hide from God and his scrutiny. The sensation of nakedness was linked to the first awareness of guilt. Adam and Eve sought a covering for their shame, a hiding place from their guilt. This was the first episode of human cover-up, a veritable “**Edengate.**”

We frequently hear evangelical Christians say that their non-Christian friends are “**seeking God**” or “**searching for God.**” Why do we say this when Scripture so clearly teaches that no unregenerate person seeks after God?

Thomas Aquinas observed that people are seeking happiness, peace, relief from guilt, personal fulfillment, and other such benefits. We understand that these benefits can be found ultimately in God alone. We draw the inference that, because people are seeking what God alone can supply, they must be seeking God himself. This is our error. In our fallen condition we desire the benefits that only God can give us but we do not want him. We want the gifts without the Giver, the benefits without the Benefactor.

Romans 3:12 declares that all have “**turned aside**” or “**gone out of the way.**”

Romans 3:12 (NASB)

12 “ALL HAVE TURNUED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE.”

Sinners are indeed “**wayward**” persons. Before believers were called “**Christians**” (a term of derision) they called themselves “**people of the Way.**” Jesus also spoke about different “**ways,**” one that leads to life and one that leads to destruction (**Matthew 7:13-14**).

Matthew 7:13-14 (NASB)

13 “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it.

14 “For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Since no one seeks after God while unregenerate, it is no surprise that we all turn aside or move out of the way.

We do not “**find**” God as a result of our search for him. We are found by him. The search for God does not end in conversion; it begins at conversion. It is the converted person who genuinely and sincerely seeks after God. **Jonathan Edwards** remarked that seeking after God is the main business of the Christian life.

IDOLATRY

Romans 3:18 concludes with the indictment of fallen humanity that “**there is no fear of God before their eyes.**”

Romans 3:18 (NASB)

¹⁸ “THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES.”

Perhaps this is the most devastating effect of original sin. We who have been created in God’s image and who were made to worship and revere our Creator, have lost the capacity for holy reverence before him. Nothing is more foreign to our fallen state than authentic worship. This does not mean we have ceased worshiping altogether. Rather it means we have become idolaters, transferring worship from God to something in the created order.

Paul says:

Romans 1:18-25 (NASB)

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

¹⁹ because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.

²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

²¹ For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

²² Professing to be wise, they became fools,

²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.

²⁵ For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

This section of Romans describes the universal

practice of idolatry. The background for the indictment is that God clearly reveals himself in nature, with the result that every human being knows there is a God. But the universal response to this revelation is to suppress it and exchange this manifest truth for a lie. We trade God’s glory for the glory of creaturely things. The very essence of idolatry is to erect an altar to a substitute for God. The fear of God to which Paul refers is not the servile fear or dread one has for an enemy, but the awe that fills the heart with reverence and inclines the soul to adoration. Sinners do not adore God by nature. We are by nature the children of wrath who carry in our hearts a fundamental enmity toward God.

To be in the state of original sin is to be in the state Scripture calls the “**flesh.**” This does not refer primarily to things physical, but to a condition of moral corruption. In the flesh we are not able to please God. Indeed we have no desire to please him. We are estranged and alienated from God.

If we ask unbelievers if they hate God, they would probably deny it categorically. Yet the Scriptures make it plain that there resides in the hearts and souls of unregenerate men a deep hatred for God. Love for God is not natural to us. Even in the redeemed state our souls grow cold and we experience feelings of indifference toward him. When we pray, our minds wander and we indulge in wool-gathering. In the midst of corporate worship, we are bored and find ourselves taking peeks at our watches. How dissimilar this is to our behavior when we are in the company of those we dearly love.

Our natural lack of love for God is confirmed by our natural lack of desire for him. As a youth I was required to memorize **The Westminster Shorter Catechism**. To me this was an onerous task. The first question of the catechism is “**What is the chief end of man?**” The answer reads, “**Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.**” This did not make much sense to me. I understood that there is some connection between glorifying God and obeying God. What I failed to grasp is the link between all of this and “**enjoying**” God. If the chief end or purpose of my life was to enjoy God, then I was missing the purpose of my very existence. I dismissed this as antiquated religious language that had no relevance to my daily life. I certainly was not inclined to seek my joy in God.

I later understood my feelings when reading Luther’s

response to the question, “Do you love God?” **Luther** replied (prior to his conversion), “**Love God? Sometimes I hate him!**” This is a rare admission among men. Even **Luther’s** candid reply was less than totally honest. Had he spoken the full truth, he would have said that he hated God all the time.

CORAM DEO **(Before the face of God)**

That something is radically wrong with the world of mankind requires no labored argument to demonstrate. That such has been the case in all generations is plain from the annals of history. This is only another way of saying that something is radically wrong with man himself, for the world is but the aggregate of all the individual members of our race. Since the whole of anything cannot be superior to the parts comprising it, it necessarily follows that the course of the world will be determined by the characters of those who comprise it. But when we come to inquire exactly what is wrong with man, and how he came to be in such a condition, unless we turn to God’s inspired Word no convincing answers are forthcoming. Apart from that divine revelation no sure and satisfactory reply can be made to such questions as these: What is the source of the unmistakable imperfections of human nature? What will furnish an adequate explanation of all the evils which infest man’s present state? Why is it that none is able to keep God’s law perfectly or do anything which is acceptable to Him while in a state of nature?



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Introduction to Hebrews

Introduction to Hebrews

***Author’s Note:** This is the initial study of a series on the book of Hebrews. The format will be to provide an “Introduction” in the first study, and then study one chapter per month over the following thirteen months. Some parts of Hebrews will be extremely challenging, so if the content of a chapter cannot be properly evaluated in one study, there may be occasions where the goal of one chapter per month may not be achieved and additional content provided in subsequent studies. All Scripture references are based on the NKJV unless noted otherwise.*

In beginning the study of Hebrews, there are several issues that must at least be mentioned. First, the actual author is not known. Obviously, there are many speculations as to who the author may have been, but in the final analysis the identity of that individual simply has not been revealed by God as to who it may be. If He had wanted the author’s identity to be known, then He would have identified the individual, but He chose not to do so. And for that simple reason, this introductory study will leave it at that. Secondly, there are no refer-

ences to Gentiles in the book of Hebrews. That does not mean that there is no application for Gentiles, for there certainly is. What it does mean, however, is that the major emphasis of the book was written primarily to Hebrews. The book is written to Jewish believers, most likely in a predominantly Jewish congregation, who were experiencing a great deal of suffering, social isolation, and religious persecution because of their faith in Christ. In [Acts 1:6](#), the expectation was extremely high that Christ would return fairly soon after His ascension, but obviously that did not take place.

“Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”

[Proverbs 13:12](#) states that “**hope deferred makes the heart sick**”. What these early Christians had hoped for had not materialized, and in the interim the Jewish nation had become even more hostile towards the Christian faith and persecution had continued to increase. Thirdly, it is assumed that the letter was written between the ascension of Christ and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70AD. If both Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed prior to the writing of the letter, then it seems only reasonable that the author would have at least mentioned that devastating event – which he does not.

Fourthly, there are a number of excellent theologians who approach the letter as having been written with three basic groups of individuals in mind: (1) Jewish believers, (2) Jewish unbelievers who were intellectually convinced of the truth and reality of Jesus Christ, but who were unwilling to commit themselves to Him, and (3) Jewish unbelievers who were not convinced. By making this kind of distinction, it provides the various commentators who have taken this approach a means of interpreting some of the difficult warning passages scattered throughout the letter by assigning a particular warning to one of those three groups. It is the intent of this author, however, to write from the perspective that all of the warnings are applicable to and written for the benefit of believers. This will be discussed in greater detail as the series develops, but it is important that the reader understand the perspective from which these studies will be written. Thomas Schreiner in

his book called [The Race Set Before Us](#) makes this statement concerning the warnings, “*We make our case that they function as a necessary means for believers to persevere unto final salvation.*”

In other words, all of the warnings are applicable to and have great benefit for believers. If the liberty is taken to assign a warning to the unbelievers of the second or third group identified above, then for all practical purposes those warnings have no meaningful benefit for the Christian.

Fifthly, it is important to understand and appreciate that Hebrews is a very pastoral document. The author is not writing or warning these Hebrews in a vacuum. For him, there is a very real and urgent pastoral problem that he is facing with the recipients of the letter. From just a practical perspective, it appears that they have become extremely tired and spiritually exhausted. They have become weary of the constant spiritual struggle that they continually find themselves fighting. Thomas Long described it this way when he said, “*The threat of this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction; they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere.*”

They just seem tired – and that can easily be understood when the incredible pressures that they were facing are understood. The real threat is that they will just drop their end of the rope and slowly drift away from the Christian faith.

So, Hebrews is written by someone who was very familiar with the circumstances and difficulties that many of these Christians were facing, and in his pastoral role and oversight he could see where some of them were headed. So, in order to help these people that he loved, he attempts to persuade them to a particular course of action. What this letter teaches the Christian is really a very simple lesson. It is the lesson that the problems faced in life can only be met and solved in the person of Christ. Now, for some that may be much too simplistic to satisfy them intellectually, but if they found themselves being persecuted, having their goods removed, and even being killed, then any frivolous foundation they may have had about life and how to manage it would simply crumble right before their eyes. There is no foundation for life apart from the atoning work of Christ. When passages like [Hebrews 11:35-38](#) are read, all of the petty and meaningless philosophical

ideas that men have about life and about themselves simply fade into oblivion and nothingness.

³⁵...Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goat-skins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented - ³⁸of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, *in dens and caves of the earth*.

As mentioned earlier, there has been much debate as to who the recipients actually were. However, it should be obvious that these are real flesh and blood believers who just seem to be struggling to hold on to their faith in the midst of very difficult circumstances and pressures that they were facing. They were Christians who were in danger of giving up. These were people who were being severely tested to keep their faith in Christ and to press on into maturity. And so the writer is faced with the difficult task of knowing how to encourage them and how to turn their attention away from what they were having to endure for Christ. No believer can cope with the kind of adversity that these Christians were being subjected to unless Christ is pre-eminent to them. They were undergoing the ultimate test of faith and endurance.

Some excellent commentators have listed various groups to whom the letter was intended. It appears that their purpose in doing so is to find a way of dealing with the various warnings because some of the warnings “seem” to indicate that a Christian can possibly lose their salvation (which obviously they cannot). For instance, one commentator states that the expository sections of Hebrews were written to both believers and unbelievers, but the “warning” passages were only addressed to unbelievers. If that is in fact the case, then the “warnings” have no significance to believers. They lose their intended spiritual impact because they are not primarily applicable to the believer, but only applicable to the unbeliever. However, that is an extremely dangerous position to assume. Warnings have a specific purpose – to protect and forewarn of impending danger.

In essence, the warnings are at the very core of what Hebrews is about. To ignore the warnings would be to miss and actually negate one of the major intents and purposes of the entire letter.

Within a simplified perspective, Hebrews was written to Christians, but to Christians who came from many varied backgrounds and traditions. Certainly that is not to say that other groups of people are not alluded to or do not have applications within the letter that would affect them, but the letter is not addressed to lost people even though some of the readers may obviously be lost. Rather it is addressed to Hebrew Christians who seem to be regressing in their Christian life. Everyone knows people like that – those who began well, but who appear that they will not finish well. Outwardly they may maintain some elementary rudiments and basics of the Christian faith and practice such as nominally attending a church, giving, having some Bible knowledge, and participating regularly in some spiritual activity, but in reality they have turned back on the Christian faith for a life of worldliness, religious formality, and spiritual indifference and lethargy. Every church has had people like this – “professing” Christians who outwardly appeared to have tremendous spiritual potential, but who later begin to slowly drift away from the faith, from the fellowship of God’s people, and eventually even make a deliberate point of rejecting the very faith that they once so vigorously confessed and defended.

And so the warnings of Hebrews appear. They are warnings like do not “**drift away**” from what you have heard and been taught ([Hebrews 2:1](#)), do not “**neglect**” the message of salvation ([Hebrews 2:3](#)), do not “**come short**” of the goal of the Christian faith ([Hebrews 4:1](#)), do not lose hold of your “**confession**” ([Hebrews 4:14](#)), do not become “**dull of hearing**” ([Hebrews 5:11](#)), do not become “**sluggish**” ([Hebrews 6:12](#)), and much more. But against this backdrop of what might be called a kind of spiritual weariness, there are those passages that seem to talk about a more permanent, caustic kind of rebellion. For instance, [Hebrews 3:12](#) says,

¹²**Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God;**

Hebrews 6:6, maybe the most difficult verse in the entire letter, says that for some the following may be “impossible”,

“if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.

Hebrews 10:29, however, is the most alarming of all.

²⁹Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?

No genuine believer can just treat Christ lightly after having come to the knowledge of the truth. Someone who abandons Christ has no other hope.

Hebrews 10:26 clearly states,

²⁶For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.

This is not just some kind of ignorant sin that someone falls into, but rather a sinning “willfully”, intentionally, knowingly. When these kinds of passages are examined, any serious exposition must start from the presupposition that the writer means exactly what he has stated. These are serious warnings. Every believer has failed, and every believer has been predisposed at some point in their Christian life to do something that they knew was not honoring to Christ and not something that He would want them to do. However, that is not the situation that is being described. This is an action that has an evil intent to it, something that is much stronger than a “moment of weakness”. This is a strong, deliberate, and intentional sinning against God, a defying God, a fist in the face kind of attitude.

Obviously, there are parts of Hebrews that make many Christians very uncomfortable. Throughout all of Christianity, there have been Christians who have become unsettled when reading some of the warning passages – and in some cases it is certainly justified. I.e., the Scriptures and the warnings are accomplishing exactly what they were intended to accomplish – to awaken, to arouse, to warn, to forewarn. The peo-

ple to whom the author was writing had many fundamental issues that were being addressed. They were very serious and sober issues, and it appears that for many that their personal faith had become deficient. It had begun to exhibit a lack of whole-heartedness, steadfastness, perseverance, and genuine progress in their Christian life. For instance, **Hebrews 5:11-14** indicates that the recipients simply were not growing in their Christian faith and walk.

¹¹of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.

¹²For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.

¹³For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe.

¹⁴But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

Now, for someone who is truly following Christ, these warning passages should actually strengthen their personal assurance that they are truly born again. Even though a believer may fail miserably at some moment in their life, for the most part they should not be just drifting, rebelling, failing to go on to maturity, sinning willfully and intentionally in an evil way, forsaking the fellowship of other believers, trampling the Son of God underfoot, treating the things of God as something common, insulting the Spirit of grace, despising God’s chastening, and refusing and ignoring God when He speaks. There are areas in any believer’s life that need improvement and there are areas where a believer may fail more often than in other areas. In fact, **Hebrews 12:1** identifies this common dilemma this way when it says,

“...let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us...”

Obviously the writer understands that every Christian has particular sins in their life that they must address, but is a true Christ honoring believer just a rebel? No. So, rather than discouraging a believer, these warning passages should have the very opposite impact on their life. They are designed to actually give encouragement because the believer understands

that these descriptions do not define their personal spiritual walk.

It would be very difficult from any portion of this letter to come to the conclusion that these people did not understand the spiritual realities of the Christian faith or that they still needed to be persuaded of the claims of Christ. Rather, the issue was not their salvation, but that they had become “**dull of hearing**” and were “**drifting**” away from the things of God in their Christian life. So, from the very start, it becomes apparent that the author was writing to people that he seemed to know very well, and obviously people about whom he deeply cared. It is as if he knew them intimately, knew of their struggles, knew of their failings, knew of their doubts, knew of their misgivings – and his purpose was to encourage them to hold fast to their faith and to not let go of those things that have spiritual substance and blessing embedded within them.

Once again, this is a very pastoral letter, and because it is pastoral in nature, it is NOT written to discourage, but to encourage. For instance, the five primary warnings in Hebrews are not written to try and convince these recipients that they have sinned and lost their salvation. From an expositional perspective, it is absolutely critical to affirm that eternal security is a foundational doctrine of Scripture. If that issue is not settled and acknowledged, then everytime that these very strong warnings are presented, the misinformed believer will find themselves analyzing whether or not they have lost their salvation because of some sin they may have committed.

If Hebrews is going to be properly understood, then it is critical to understand the context in which it is being written. This is not just some kind of technical information that the writer is passing on to his readers – not at all. This is a deeply personal letter written by someone who has an immense concern for his readers. Think of it as if it is a father writing to his children to warn them of some dangers that he sees beginning to develop in their lives. He senses that there are certain things developing in their life that will lead them away from a deep and meaningful relationship with God, so he is writing to encourage them so that they will not have to suffer the inevitable consequences of bad spiritual decisions. The warnings that the author shares with his

readers are not warnings trying to convince them that they are lost, but warnings to help them understand that the poor spiritual decisions they make in their life will always have consequences. For instance, no one, either saved or lost, can escape the spiritual law of sowing and reaping. Everyone reaps what they sow. [Galatians 6:7-8](#) states,

⁷Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. ⁸For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.

Verses like these serve as a warning, but clearly they are not primarily written to unbelievers, but to believers. I.e., the warning of [Galatians 6:7-8](#) would have no personal benefit for the believer if their purpose was somehow relegated to an unbeliever. However, that is exactly how some approach Hebrews. They consign the warnings in Hebrews to unbelievers, and if that were the case, then the warnings would have no practical benefit for the believer. In the Midwest, most of the towns have very loud siren warnings for approaching tornadoes. Those siren warnings are important forewarnings to everyone in the town. Obviously they are only going off for one reason – to forewarn and help protect the people from possible harm. If the people do not heed the alarms, there is a grave possibility that they may actually be killed. They have much to lose by not heeding the warnings.

Unfortunately, Christians can certainly make decisions that corrupt their life and subsequently impact and corrupt the lives of others. When our children were growing up, each of us as parents issued certain warnings to them in every area of their life. Why? It was because of our deep concern for their safety and well-being. If they could not swim, we warned them about getting too close to the water without an adult. If we lived near a street, we put up fences and warned them about getting near the automobiles that were going up and down the street. The warnings were not there to hurt them or to injure them. Rather, they were intended to protect them from personal harm and loss. I will never forget when I bought my first tractor. One of the farmers in the area was a very good friend of ours and one day he was at the house and we began to talk about the tractor and some of its inherent dangers. He had been a farmer for many years, had seen multiple farming accidents, and began to warn me about the power

take off (PTO) at the back of the tractor where the rotary cutters were attached. He kept warning me about how very dangerous the PTO was when it was running. If someone accidentally got some of their clothes caught up in the PTO while it was running, mostly likely it would kill them in just a matter of seconds. I have never forgotten that warning that he instructed me in. I taught my boys about it, I have shown it to my grandchildren, and to this day I never get close to the PTO when it is moving – never. The warning was not given by the farmer to hurt me in any way, but simply to protect me.

Now, it is important to appreciate that for every believer that there is much to gain or much to lose by not heeding the warnings of Hebrews. For those believers who do not press on into maturity there is much to lose. Unfortunately, Scripture does not actually quantify what the loss may be, but it appears to be a significant loss. Obviously there are undefinable eternal rewards to be lost. Scripture does not necessarily validate what all of the actual rewards may be, but whatever they are and however they are provided to the believer, it is apparent that any believer can suffer some level of significant future loss. There are temporal rewards such as God’s peace and God’s blessing which may be removed. In the Old Testament there is the example of the Israelites after the exodus and how they forfeited all that God had planned for them. It was all lost and they all died in the wilderness without ever receiving the promises. It was a tragic loss. [Hebrews 3-4](#) addresses this and simply states in [Hebrews 3:16-19](#),

¹⁶For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? ¹⁷Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? ¹⁹So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.

One of the most frightening of all losses would be that of an eventual hardening of an individual’s heart. On three separate occasions in [Hebrews 3-4](#), the writer encourages his readers to “**not harden their hearts**” ([Hebrews 3:8, 3:15, and 4:7](#)). Why would he do that? The answer is both obvious and simple. It is because that is exactly what could happen and was happening because of spiritual neglect. And just

personal observation would be sufficient to validate that when this happens, that many individuals never seem to recover. [Hebrews 6:4-6](#) states it this way,

⁴For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.

As much as a believer may know that God the Father loves them, that God the Son gave His life for them, and that God the Holy Spirit lives within them, they still cannot dismiss the fact that spiritual neglect generally has very serious and permanent consequences. The words that the writer uses to express his concern are words and phrases like not giving “**earnest heed**” ([Hebrews 2:1](#)), or “**neglect**” ([Hebrews 2:3](#)). On four (4) different occasions, the writer encourages his listeners to “**hold fast**” to something. [Hebrews 3:6](#) says,

⁶but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.

[Hebrews 3:14](#) says,

¹⁴For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end...

[Hebrews 4:14](#) says,

¹⁴Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.

[Hebrews 10:23](#) says,

²³Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised *is faithful*

Once again, why would the writer encourage his listeners to “**hold fast**” to something? It was because he knew that they were in grave danger of “letting go” of something – letting go of their confidence in Christ and letting go of their confession of Christ. [Hebrews 10:38-39](#) talks about “**drawing back**”.

³⁸Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.” ³⁹But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.

Others were in danger of “**refusing Him who speaks**” and “**turning away**”. [Hebrews 12:25](#) says, ²⁵**See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven.**

Obviously, these types of verses cannot be read without at least recognizing that many of the readers had begun to seriously backslide away from Christ. Everyone knows people who have completely forfeited their testimony by neglecting good judgment and discretion in their life. Often the impact of their negative testimony to their family and to the lost people that surround their life cannot be measured. Even though we solemnly believe in and adhere wholeheartedly to the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation, it still must be appreciated that all of this somehow works together, and that as Christians we all have responsibilities and privileges that cannot be ignored or forsaken without downstream consequences.

One of the last and obvious consequences of not heeding the warnings is simply that it necessitates that God administer His discipline and chastening in a believer’s life. [Hebrews 12](#) is the classic doctrinal statement in Scripture on “**chastening**”. The word “**chastening**” refers to disciplinary correction, and Scripture describes it as not being something that is pleasant, but rather something that is “**painful**”, grievous, or sorrowful. [Hebrews 12:11](#) declares, ¹¹**Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.**

It is not the intention of this introductory study to authenticate that these recipients could or could not lose their salvation. That issue will be addressed in the exposition of the difficult passages. For the moment just suffice it to say that salvation is not something that a genuine believer can lose. Biblical salvation cannot be lost, but clearly it is something that can be neglected, disregarded, avoided, and ignored, and that not without consequences. At the heart of this letter, that is one of the elements of the Christian life that the writer is dealing with – a spirit of backsliding and lack of spiritual earnestness. One

of the gravest dangers that a professing Christian can make is living with the mistaken notion that their sins are forgiven and that they are headed to heaven, but without the least attachment whatsoever to Christ. It may be that their profession of faith has not been cast away and that their religious habits have been outwardly maintained, but at the very core of what they are there is nothing to show that they are truly and genuinely walking with Christ. What these individuals seem to want is a very comfortable and secure hope for the future, but without any personal sacrifice or discipline on their part. Unfortunately, it seems that this lack of spiritual earnestness and perseverance is often the earmark of many professing believers and churches – and in many cases it does actually indicate that people have not been saved. If that is the case, then Hebrews will make those individuals very uncomfortable, and that is exactly what it is supposed to do.

Every word in this encouragement to the Hebrews is a word about **standing firm** in Christ. This letter carries with it a very strong reproof to those believers who refuse to heed God’s Word in their life. That part of the message of Hebrews cannot be escaped. [Hebrews 13:22](#), speaking of its goal of exhorting, states, ²²**And I appeal to you, brethren, bear with the word of exhortation, for I have written to you in few words.**

Many of these Christians had suffered severe persecution and personal loss. They were enduring ongoing public abuse, ridicule, imprisonment, and the looting of their property. The only thing that they had not yet been called on to do was to die for their faith, which eventually many would. [Hebrews 10:32-36](#) describes their dilemma:

³²**But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: ³³partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; ³⁴for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. ³⁵Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. ³⁶For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise:**

So, here are some believers who have suffered greatly for Christ, but in their suffering they were beginning to experience discouragement and loss of heart. They were becoming spiritually fatigued and disheartened, spiritually tired. [Hebrews 10:25](#) reveals that some of them were struggling with even meeting with other believers, and in the process, their spiritual development had virtually stopped.

²⁵**not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.**

At a personal level, our hearts should go out to these people and to what they had endured for the sake of Christ. Their testimony of what they were willing to suffer for Christ would put many Christians to shame, but even in their evident courage to be strong in the Lord, they still had to battle with this idea of falling back, of regressing, and of drifting away. In the face of their difficult circumstances, however, the author of Hebrews saw what was happening to these Christians as something of great concern to him.

There are many people in local churches that for the most part have forsaken the assembling of themselves with other Christians on a regular basis, but it is not because they are facing the kind of spiritual battles that these Hebrew Christians were experiencing. It is not because they are suffering for Christ or because they are being persecuted for their faith and have become tired and weary of the spiritual battle they constantly face. It is not that at all. To the contrary, it is generally because they have become spiritually lazy and uncommitted. It is because they have established other priorities in their life and simply do not have time for fellowship with believers. It is these kinds of individuals that the writer of Hebrews is addressing. That may be one reason why in [Hebrews 3 and 4](#) he repeatedly encourages them not to harden their hearts. Once again, it is not easy to quantify what the spiritual loss may actually be for those individuals who do harden their hearts. It could just simply be a spiritual indifference and apathy that removes them from God's blessing on their life. Unfortunately, many will find excuses for their lack of a deep, abiding commitment and perseverance. Observation validates that they will often find ways to justify their neglect of important spiritual disciplines in

their life, and ultimately find fault in those who are actually faithful.

Without oversimplifying the issues, what is found in Hebrews is primarily twofold:

First, it has the largest concentration of the exaltation of Christ in the New Testament. It portrays Him as the Son of God and great high priest who is both human and divine. It reveals Him as the exalted One and as the crucified One Who has no parallel.

Secondly, and at the same time, it makes very stringent demands relative to what it even means to be a Christian. In a very solemn and earnest way, it summons every Christian to an unqualified commitment to Christ, to a tenacious and determined perseverance in their faith, and to a willingness to suffer for Christ when called on to do so.

So, what cannot be missed when studying Hebrews is that at the heart of the book is its intense exaltation of Jesus Christ. In fact, if not handled properly, the warnings can take on a greater significance to the reader than intended and actually camouflage this amazing exaltation of Christ. In reality, that would be spiritually tragic. The intent of the author of Hebrews is not to present Christ as someone who seems to take pleasure in frightening people into obedience and commitment, but rather to captivate their hearts with Christ and what He has done for them. When that becomes a reality for a believer, living the Christian life becomes a thing of immense joy and great satisfaction, rather than something fearful and dreadful.

Just think about this in a practical way. Suppose that when a believer started each day in the morning that rather than thinking of Jesus Christ as a great and merciful high priest and One who is continually making intercession on their behalf that they saw Him as a severe and penalizing tyrant – someone determined to make their life miserable if they did not do every single thing that He said. Obviously, that would be a very difficult way to live. To the contrary, a believer should find themselves mesmerized with the glory of Christ and with the strength found in His Word. They should be more than thankful for His enduring patience and longsuffering and find Him to be the most glorious Saviour imaginable and One who loves with an everlasting love. He is eternally forgiving and con-

tinually strengthens and helps every believer to live out the Christian life in a way that honors and exalts Him. The believer has nothing to fear. No wonder the author can say in [Hebrews 4:16](#),

“Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Christ is always full of mercy and grace. His very throne is a “**throne of grace**”. [Hebrews 4:16](#) is not the picture of someone who is a spiritual tyrant intent on oppressing all who may fail in their life. Nothing that He does towards His children is designed to spiritually torment them into obedience. If a believer finds themselves afraid and anxious about the warnings, then when they come to the passages that exalt Christ they may completely miss what the writer is truly communicating. In most cases, perception is much stronger than reality, and if someone’s perception of Christ is that of a harsh and uncompassionate God rather than an amazing Saviour, then they will completely miss the message of Hebrews. This is really very crucial to how this letter is approached.

The second major component of Hebrews is that it does make very strong and stringent demands relative to what it even means to be a Christian. One cannot just casually dismiss the fact that there are many exhortations within Hebrews on what it means to live out the Christian life. What actually **intensifies** this reality is the author’s overwhelming presentation of Christ. I.e., the greater the sacrifice of Christ, then the greater the believer’s responsibilities to honor that sacrifice. Someone who is truly born again and indwelt by the Holy Spirit cannot just treat Jesus Christ with indifference and triviality. For someone to have this magnificent exposition of who Christ is and what He has done for them personally, but then to treat Him as if He is unimportant and His work as fruitless in their life would be a terrible insult and offense to God the Father who sacrificed His Son, a terrible insult to Christ who actually became the designated “scapegoat” for our personal vileness, and a terrible insult to the very Spirit of grace who is working deeply within each believer’s life. **It is this glorious exaltation of Christ that actually becomes the reason and justification for the very strong warnings and exhortations.** That is how the two elements of Hebrews are connected.

It is this glorious exaltation of Christ that in a sense insists and mandates the believer’s attention and respect.

Let us assume that as a parent that someone makes an incredible sacrifice to save for their children’s college education. They work overtime and take on a second job, and they do this for 15 or 20 years. They live resourcefully and are not wasteful in any way. They save at every opportunity. They drive used cars, rarely by new clothes, hardly ever eat out, and do all the repairs that they can on their home. The sacrifice that they make personally is an incredible sacrifice for their child’s personal benefit and one that has cost them dearly. So when the child actually goes off to school, it is the level of their parent’s personal sacrifice for them that actually demands and insists that they work as hard and as diligently as possible to honor, respect, and revere the personal sacrifice made for them. It came as a great cost to their family. However, what if when they actually get to college they waste the opportunity and eventually fail out of school? Most likely what that means is that they never respected and honored what had been done for them. To the contrary, they treated it lightly and with total disrespect. Ultimately it says something about what they thought about their parents and how much they actually loved and valued the sacrifice they made on their behalf.

What a believer does with Christ and how they treat His sacrifice is really no different. The magnitude of His personal sacrifice on the believer’s behalf is overwhelming, and for a believer to just act as if Christ’s sacrifice has no personal relevance for them, no substantial meaning for their life, and no bearing on what they do and how they live – how meaningless would that be? What would that say about that individual, and ultimately what would that say about their so called salvation experience? We can be assured that it would say a lot.

The issue is really a very simple one to define. How can someone who understands who Christ is and what He has accomplished for them, just treat Him as if He is irrelevant and unimportant, and as if He means nothing to them? **The believer’s life is always a reflection of what they think about Christ and of how much they actually love Christ.** For someone who claims to be a believer but who treats the words of Scripture as if they are insignificant and irrelevant, be assured that the primary reason for that is simply because **they do not**

think much of Christ. They think that their ideas, their approaches, and their “feelings” about life are more relevant and more important than what Christ has to say. On the positive side, the more a believer loves Christ, then the more compelled and motivated they are to live for Christ. Jesus Christ is always the central focus of every part of the Christian life. He is what divides the committed from the uncommitted and the spiritually alive from the spiritually dead. [Hebrews 7:25](#) has a small phrase in it that sums up how the believer is able to even approach God. It says,

²⁵**Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.**

How does someone come to God? How does someone obtain the spiritual strength that they need to live out their Christian life? How does a believer gain the wisdom and understanding that they need to live victoriously over sin and spiritual indifference? It is **THROUGH CHRIST**. Whatever God wants to provide for the Christian life is given to the believer “**through Him**”, or by the means of Jesus Christ. In a very practical sense, what this means is that the more that a believer deepens their walk and personal fellowship and commitment to Christ, the greater will be the power that they have to live the Christian life.

In Joshua 23 and 24 there are several passages that seem to have relevance to this discussion. This is Joshua’s farewell address. In the address Joshua briefly recites for the Israelites what God has actually done for them. I.e., his final exhortation to them was based on the previous and obvious work of God on their behalf. In [Joshua 23:6](#) he encourages them to be “**courageous**” as they go forward, but he gives them the consequences of not being courageous. He says that they will “**turn aside**”.

⁶**Therefore be very courageous to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, lest you turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left,**

In [Joshua 23:8](#) he exhorts them to “**hold fast to the Lord**”.

⁸**but you shall hold fast to the LORD your God, as you have done to this day.**

By comparison in Hebrews, the readers are exhorted to “**hold fast**” to their “**confidence**” and “**confession**” on three different occasions ([Hebrews 3:6, 4:14, 10:23](#)). In [Joshua 23:11](#), Joshua exhorts the people to “**take careful heed**”.

¹¹**Therefore take careful heed to yourselves, that you love the LORD your God.**

Notice, however, what Joshua says in [Joshua 23:12 and 13](#).

¹²**Or else, if indeed you do go back, and cling to the remnant of these nations—these that remain among you—and make marriages with them, and go in to them and they to you, ¹³know for certain that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations from before you. But they shall be snares and traps to you, and scourges on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land which the LORD your God has given you.**

I.e., wrong spiritual decisions have the great potential of producing wrong consequences. That simple truth cannot be dismissed as if our life is the exception. Every believer has to “**hold fast**” and to “**take careful heed**” to what they know to be right, “**or else**” and “**know for certain**” will take place. This is not Joshua making a threat, but revealing a spiritual reality. [Joshua 23:15-16](#) even has a stronger warning when it says,

¹⁵**Therefore it shall come to pass, that as all the good things have come upon you which the LORD your God promised you, so the LORD will bring upon you all harmful things, until He has destroyed you from this good land which the LORD your God has given you. ¹⁶When you have transgressed the covenant of the LORD your God, which He commanded you, and have gone and served other gods, and bowed down to them, then the anger of the LORD will burn against you, and you shall perish quickly from the good land which He has given you.”**

Unfortunately, those verses are the testimony of the rest of the Old Testament historical narrative. Both Israel and Judah rebelled against God and they were taken off into captivity. At the same time, however, the Old Testament gives the parallel testimony of God’s longsuffering and His extended mercy for generations. His patience, compassion, and goodness ex-

tended are without equal. God is sovereignly causing “**all things to work together**” for His purposes, but He still requires that each believer make godly choices. If that were not true, then there would be no need for any exhortations that demand a response.

The message in Joshua and the message in Hebrews are parallel truths. They were written in different dispensations and to different audiences, but the truths that are embedded within them are very similar. For Hebrews, the message is self-evident. Believers cannot just treat Christ indifferently or superficially. It is this long-term and abiding spiritual indifference and superficiality regarding a person’s commitment to Christ, His Word, and His church that in all likelihood reveals that they may never have been saved.

The testimony of Scripture is clear. Whenever God’s people go astray, He will discipline them. [Hebrews 12:7-8](#) clearly states the reality of this truth,

7If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? 8But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons.

So, the message is simple - even though God is extremely loving, patient, and longsuffering, there is a limit as to how far He will allow a believer to live in sin without consequences. Scripture does not define what that “limit” may be. Every believer should be extremely grateful that every time that they fail that God does not discipline them. However, to balance all of that out, Scripture does teach that if a believer continues to live in sin that God’s discipline and chastening will eventually be forthcoming. It is difficult to quantify what His longsuffering actually means in reference to time. In some cases, the discipline may simply be that God allows a believer to have what they want. That was the discipline of non-believers in [Romans 1:24, 26, and 28](#) when on three separate occasions God states that He simply “**gave them up**” to live as they chose to live and ultimately suffer the consequences. In many cases that may be the very discipline that God applies to a believer. Their life simply becomes

fruitless, joyless, and without peace and assurance. [Psalm 81:11-12](#) states the truth this way,

11 “But My people would not heed My voice, and Israel would have none of Me. 12 So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, to walk in their own counsels.

Now, the intent in all of this is not to frighten or threaten anyone. Why should any believer be afraid of Christ? The exhortation is very simple in that every believer needs to recognize the spiritual truth that consistently making wrong spiritual choices that demean the person of Christ often have unquantifiable consequences.

Generally, when one of the New Testament writers like Paul would compose a letter like Romans or Ephesians, it would begin with a very strong doctrinal section and then be followed by sections of exhortation to live out the Christian faith based on the outlined doctrines. It was an especially strong distinctive of how Paul presented his information. When he used that pattern, one of the things that he was doing was operating under a very important spiritual principle – namely that living an effective Christian life is dependent on the great doctrines of Scripture. I.e., because these particular things are true, this is how the believer should live.

So, in reviewing Hebrews, a similar pattern is there, but with an obvious difference. There is this great doctrine on the exaltation of Christ that simply permeates everything that the author is writing. The difference, however, between this letter and some of the other New Testament letters is that many of the doctrines and the exhortations are integrated and woven into one another. There are large sections of Scripture, for instance, on the person of Christ ([Hebrews 1](#) as an example), but generally following them there are immediate exhortations and warnings associated with what the writer has just stated. That is why there are so many of the “**therefores**” throughout the document. There are actually twenty-eight (28) “**therefores**”. What that reveals is that there is a great deal of both doctrine and exhortation in Hebrews. Everytime there is a “**therefore**”, it is because the writer has provided a doctrinal basis for what he is encouraging the reader to do with the “**therefore**”.

There are approximately sixteen (16) specific teachings given to exalting Christ. However, there are over

forty (40) specific exhortations, and that does not include the warnings. So, once again it is important to see how the author actually views what he has written, and what he sees as the primary purpose of his letter. [Hebrews 13:22](#) says,

22And I appeal to you, brethren, bear with the word of exhortation, for I have written to you in few words.

The particular word for “**exhortation**” is the Greek word *paraklēsis* from which the word “Paraclete” for the Holy Spirit is derived. It refers to one who comes alongside to help and to comfort. This is an intensely intimate word and when translated to represent the Holy Spirit it is sometimes translated as “**Comforter**”. So, the purpose of Hebrews is intended to bring great comfort and encouragement to the readers, and are not words designed to frighten and alarm them. That does not mean that there are not strong words of reproof and correction in the letter, for there are and there should be. If these believers have understood the author’s amazing teaching on Christ, and then have walked away from Him, the personal consequences of that decision could have strong ramifications. The consequences are not scripturally quantified as such. The following is the magnitude of the consequences in Hebrews, and it should be observed that they are more general in nature than definitive. The consequences are that a believer might “**drift away**” ([Hebrews 2:1](#)), may “**not escape**” ([Hebrews 2:3 and Hebrews 12:25](#)), may “**harden**” their hearts ([Hebrews 3:8,15 and Hebrews 4:7](#)), may “**fall**” ([Hebrews 4:11](#)), may find it “**impossible...to renew again to repentance**” ([Hebrews 6:4,6](#)), and may experience some form of “**punishment**” ([Hebrews 10:29](#)). That is it. It would be impossible to quantify the actual magnitude of the consequences with just those few statements.

Often I have to travel on a very mountainous stretch of road on I-40 in North Carolina. There are many warning signs identifying important speed limits, sharp curves, steep inclines, and falling rocks. However, the warning signs do not give the consequences of what could happen to someone if they chose not to heed the warnings. The signs only give the warnings. However, here is what is clearly understood: **in every warning there is an implied danger or there would not be a warning.** And that is exact-

ly what the writer of Hebrews is doing. He wants his readers to understand that there are implied dangers in not heeding God’s spiritual warnings for their life. How God actually administers His discipline is different in every person based on what God knows it will take to correct the individual’s behavior. The writer is not challenging every little sin in a person’s life, but he is challenging the apparent tendency that some had of potentially forsaking Christ – which obviously he did see as extremely serious.

Hebrews not only tells the believer that they must press on, but it explains how that actually happens. A believer presses on because of and through the surpassing greatness of Jesus Christ. They press on in the same way that those in [Hebrews 11](#) pressed on – “**by faith**”. In [Hebrews 11](#), the term “**by faith**” is used eighteen (18) different times. Everything in the Christian life must find its grounding in the person and work of Christ, but it is something that must be appropriated “**by faith**” in the believer’s life. If a believer really wants to grow spiritually, then they must understand that it requires an ongoing and daily dependence on the living Christ and indwelling Holy Spirit. In an age of easy-believism, cheap grace, and spiritual lukewarmness, it is essential that a committed believer appreciate that there are no shortcuts to a deep and abiding relationship with the living God. To the contrary, the exhortation of Hebrews is to not just casually “**drift away**” from the things of God and to not “**harden**” our hearts, but to “**hold**” our confidence steadfast to the end, to “**be diligent**” to enter His rest, to “**hold fast our confession**”, to “**come boldly to the throne of grace**” for spiritual help, and to learn what it means to live “**by faith**”. [Hebrews 6:17-19](#) says,

17Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, ¹⁸that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. ¹⁹This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil,

Christians have this amazing “**hope**” and “**strong consolation**” for their life, but it is still something that each one has to personally “**to lay hold of**”. As the writer says here, it is the believer’s “**refuge**”, and it is “**both sure and steadfast**”. This hope and this confi-

dence is the believer's, a part of their inheritance, but it is still something that they personally have "to lay hold of". That is why there is such a large exhortation in [Hebrews 11](#) that the believer is to live the Christian life "by faith". The ESV and the Amplified Bible translate [Hebrews 6:18](#) this way,

¹⁸ so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. (ESV)

¹⁸ This was so that, by two unchangeable things [His promise and His oath] in which it is impossible for God ever to prove false or deceive us, we who have fled [to Him] for refuge might have mighty indwelling strength and strong encouragement to grasp and hold fast the hope appointed for us and set before [us].

That is what the Christian has to do – "hold fast" to what Christ has done for them, and to "grasp and hold fast" to Christ and not let go. What a great encouragement for every believer – to "hold fast" to Christ.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹MacArthur, x.
²MacArthur, xi-xv.
³Schreiner, 16.
⁴Long, 3.
⁵Allen, Preface.
⁶Brown, 13-14.
⁷Allen, 64.
⁸Murray, v.
⁹Brown, 24.
¹⁰Ellingworth, 78-79.
¹¹Ellingworth, 80.
¹²Ellingworth, 79.
¹³O'Brien, 2.
¹⁴Ellingworth, 22.
¹⁵Ellingworth, 22.
¹⁶Murray, 22.
¹⁷Murray, 26.
¹⁸Bruce, 9.
¹⁹O'Brien, 13.
²⁰O'Brien, 1.
²¹Phillips, xv.
²²Allen, Preface.

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Notes

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