

Were The First Century Hebrew Christians In Danger Of Losing Salvation And Falling Into Hell Fire?

Heb. 3:7-16 *So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.' So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion." Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed"? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.*

I. Passages that are used to defend the concept of losing one's Salvation: Heb. 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 6:1-8; 10:26-39. This is probably because the judgments threatened are so severe, especially those that mention fire. (Later we will show that the mention of fire does not refer to eternal damnation.)

A. Many who believe in eternal security of the believer will say that these passages refer to unbelievers or false-professors among the believers. It is said that they "profess but do not possess." We will demonstrate that this view is inconsistent with the context of Hebrews.

II. The writer is addressing his readers who are clearly believers and he refers to them as "brethren" (10:19; 13:22) and "holy brethren" (3:1). In the warning passages we see no transition shifting attention to a different group within the readership. In fact, statements are made to the objects of the warnings that can only apply to Christians (3:1; 5:12; 6:9; 10:24-25, 29).

A. The author identifies with the objects of the warnings with the terms "we" (2:1, 3; 3:14, 19; 4:3; 10:26, 30, 39; 12:28; and "us" in 4:1, 2, 11; 6:1, 3; 10:26, 30, 39; 12:28).

B. He calls them "brethren" (3:12) recognizing their position in the family of God.

C. They had exercised saving belief in Christ as Savior (4:3; 10:39). It is not said that they believed in an insufficient way.

D. The objects of warning have confidence and assurance of salvation in Christ (3:14; 10:35).

1. They are thus told to "hold fast (3:14; 4:14; 10:23) and endure (10:36) in that confidence.

III. The objects of the warnings are in danger of denying their faith in the face of persecution and hardship.

- A. They could “drift away” (2:1).
- B. They could depart “from the living God” (3:12).
- C. “Draw back” 10:39).
- D. “Turn away” (12:25).

IV. These same believers who are being warned are also encouraged to enter God’s rest (4:11).

- A. This is a rest they did not necessarily enter into upon being born again.
- B. They are encouraged to go on to maturity (6:1).
 - 1. In the OT, “rest” was a privilege this side of the grave reserved for believers who obediently followed God in faith and growth into maturity.
 - 2. The Israelites by faith offered the first Passover and by faith passed through the Red Sea (Heb. 11:28-29). This was saving faith, as in every example of Heb. 11.
 - 3. The “rest” they failed to enter into was the Promised Land, not eternal life.

V. These believers and objects of warning had suffered for their faith subsequent to being “illuminated” (10:32-34) and they were able to endure this persecution because, at the time, they knew they had a heavenly possession (10:34).

- A. They are never told to believe in Christ as if they were unbelievers. The book of Hebrews was written to exhort and encourage the readers (13:22).

VI. They had experienced the blessings that come with faith in Christ as evidenced by the fact that they had...(6:4-5):

- A. Been “enlightened” and “illuminated” (10:32)
- B. “Tasted the Heavenly Gift”
- C. “Become partakers of the Holy Spirit” (cf. Rom. 8:9).
- D. “Tasted the good word of God”
- E. Tasted “the powers of the age to come”
 - 1. To apply these descriptions to unbelievers would violate the text and the plain sense of the language.
- F. They had “Received the knowledge of the truth” (10:26)
- G. They were “sanctified” (10:29)
- H. They “know” God.
- I. They are called “Just” or righteous (10:38)

VII. The writer uses OT analogies that in the past and present apply to God’s chastening of His own people.

- A. In Heb. 3:16, Psalm 95 is used of the redeemed who came out of Egypt thus referring to redeemed readers.
- B. In Heb. 10:30, Deuteronomy 32:36 speaks of God judging “His people.”
- C. In Heb. 10:31 there is prospect of falling “into” the hands of God.
 - 1. Not falling into hell.
 - 2. Not falling out of salvation.
 - a. To fall away from God’s hands completely would require a repeat of the crucifixion (Heb. 6:6) and shame on Jesus if He did not sanctify us once-for-all at His first crucifixion (10:10, 14)..

3. One cannot fall out of God's hands (John 10:27-29).

4. Saints are either in God's hand of blessing or His hand of chastisement.

VIII. They face the prospect of rewards contingent on faithful perseverance and obedience. In this way they can...

A. Be "partakers of Christ" (3:14).

B. Can enter God's rest (4:9, 11).

C. Can have "an enduring possession...in heaven" (10:34).

D. Can receive a "great reward" (10:35).

E. Can "receive a kingdom" (12:28).

Conclusion: The evidence is clear that the author is addressing believers who have been sanctified "once-for-all" (10:10). There is no need to see the objects of the warnings as unbelievers. They are not in need of eternal salvation, but of faithful endurance and to be saved from death or some other form of God's chastisement.

These are Jewish believers who have become tempted to mask their Christianity with Judaism, or revert completely, because of the threat of persecution.

Believers today need to take these warning seriously and dedicate themselves to faithfulness in their walk and confession. The book of Hebrews applies to us.

IX. The danger of "fire" in the warning passages of Hebrews. Many commentators see this as imagery of hell (6:8; 10:27; 12:31). To what else does the imagery of "fire" refer in the Bible?

A. God's earthly discipline of His people (Num. 11:1-3; Isa. 9:19; 10:17; 29:6; 42:25; Jer. 11:16; 15:14; 17:4; Lam. 2:3-4; 4:11; Ezek. 22:20-22; Amos 2:5; Obed. 18; Ps. 78:21; 80:16).

B. A cleansing or purifying trial or judgment (Ps. 66:12; Zech. 13:9; Mal. 3:2; John 15:6; I Cor. 3:13-15; I Pet. 1:7).

C. A picture of God's jealousy for the faithfulness of His people (Deut. 4:24; Ps. 79:5; Zeph. 1:18; 3:8).

D. The work of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11; Lk. 3:16; Acts 2:3).

X. References to "fire" in the epistle to the Hebrews:

A. In 6:8 *But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.*

1. NKJV says that the land is in danger of being "rejected" (*adokimos*) which means to be disqualified (referring to believers who lose their future rewards (I Cor. 9:7) and is never used of hell.

a. This earth (unfruitful believers) is disqualified from usefulness and the accompanying benefits.

2. "Curse" can also refer to God's judgment upon Christians. When it states that this unfruitful earth is to be burned it is imagery of the thorns and briars being burned off the earth, because the earth itself does not burn.

a. It is the fire of judgment or of purging that burns up that which is useless (Jn. 15:6; I Cor. 3:13-15).

3. These believers were in danger of becoming “sluggish” (6:12), which would render them useless to God and others.
 - a. We must distinguish between eternal damnation and God’s disciplining judgment that is designed to make believers holy and fruitful (12:10-11).
 - b. The analogy is that of Isa. 5:1-7 where God warned that he would burn Israel for being an unfruitful vineyard.
 4. Believers who refuse to mature in their faith and squander God’s blessings will produce that which is useless and fit only to be discarded, or burned.
- B. (10:27) *but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.* That the willful sin is committed by a believer is indicated by the author’s use of the word “we”.
1. Sin is adversity against God and even though total calamity does not always result, it should always be expected.
 - a. It comes in the form of judgment (chastisement) and fiery indignation, which devours (calamity).
 2. In this particular context, the willful sin is the forsaking the local church (assembly) and turning back to Judaism.
 3. (10:29) Such a sin would be tantamount to:
 - a. “Trampled the Son of God underfoot.”
 - b. “Treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant” [note: the blood that sanctified him. cf. 10:10-14].
 - c. “has insulted the spirit of grace.” [cf. Eph. 4:30 *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption*].
 4. To what does the writer of Hebrews compare this fiery judgment: Hell or temporal punishment?
 - a. (10:28) *Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.* Is this a description of capital punishment or eternal damnation in hell?
 - b. Though a sanctified person does not fall out of God’s hand of mercy and grace (Jn. 10:27-29; Heb. 10:10, 14), the saint (*His people* 10:30) can fall into God’s hand of judgment...and this can indeed be a *dreadful thing* (vs. 31).
 5. Gods chastisement of believers can be a dreadful thing.
 - a. Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead by God because they lied and *great fear came upon all the church* (Acts 5:11).
 - b. There will be a judgment seat of Christ (Rom. 14:10-12; I Cor. 3:11-15; II Cor. 5:10) which can be a fearful prospect for those who have not lived faithfully... *Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men* (II Cor. 5:11).
 - c. Many of the Corinthians had committed sins unto physical illness and even unto death...*That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep* (I Cor.

11:30) [Note I John 5:16-17 regarding believers to commit sin unto physical death].

d. What is the “more severe” punishment than capital punishment referred to in vs. 29? Suffering in this life can be so severe that some people prefer death to find relief (Lam. 4:6, 9) *The punishment of my people is greater than that of Sodom, which was overthrown in a moment without a hand turned to help her... Those killed by the sword are better off than those who die of famine; racked with hunger, they waste away for lack of food from the field.*

6. The contrast between “destruction” (*apoleian*, or “ruin”) and “saving of the soul” (literally, “preserving of the life”) in vs. 39 could speak of physical life and death or contrast a ruined life with a life that is delivered from the consequences of God’s judgment upon *His people* (believers).

7. The “fire” pictures the dreadful consequences that a believer will face if he willfully turns away from Jesus Christ in a way that affirms a false gospel (Gal. 1:6-9).

a. Though the consequences can be devastating and even more painful than death, eternal hell is not mentioned here.

b. The readers, Hebrew Christians being tempted to re-identify with sinful Israel, might also understand this as a warning about the impending national judgment of a fiery destruction of Jerusalem which occurred only a short time later (A.D. 70). This is something they would know about from Jesus’ warnings (Matt. 23:27-24:2; Mark. 13:1-2; Lk. 21:5-6; Acts 2:40).

C. Heb. 12:28-29 *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our “God is a consuming fire.”* This should be motivation for all believers to practice gracious godly reverence in God’s service. This is not meant to be a threat of hell because vs. 28 speaks confidently of the readers “receiving a kingdom” in the future.

1. The metaphor of God as a consuming fire comes from Deut. 4:24 where it speaks of God’s jealousy.

Conclusion: The judgment of fire in Hebrews is God’s discipline on believers which can be very severe. Such judgment will be meted out in this life in the form of painful experiences. Believers do not need to fear an eternal burning hell, but they will experience God’s burning anger if they willfully turn away from Jesus Christ and His church and, for whatever benefits, affirm other gospels which cannot save.