

No Sacrifice Remains: A Study of Hebrews 10.26-31

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If one were to compile a list of the most discussed, disputed, and misunderstood passages in the Bible, Hebrews 10.26-31 would easily earn its place on this list. The tone of the passage draws attention to the harsh realities of falling away from the one true God. It raises a host of existential questions that tug at the mind, causing one to wonder if this might be a possibility for oneself. How can there be no sacrifice remaining? What does it mean to trample the Son of God underfoot? And above all else, what sort of dreadful things will occur when one falls into the hands of the living God? Read out of context this passage can instill fear in the hearts of believers, making them question every thought, word, and action, all the while anxious about their final destiny. Read in context, however, these same verses can inspire a holy reverence for the Lord Almighty, the true 'fear of the Lord' of which the wisdom literature speaks, which moves one to proper introspection and living in the light of the mercies of Christ.

It is, therefore, necessary to seek to understand this passage, as well as possible, in the flow of the argument that the author of the epistle is writing. In light of this, there must be a cursory exegesis done on the text before this passage and on the following text to understand where the author was seeking to lead his readers. In the midst of this, in a somewhat tangential yet exegetically important way, the Old Testament quotations shall be explicated in such a way as to understand *Auctor's* hermeneutic of the 'Scriptures' available in his day. It is from the whole of this exegetical work that the theology of the passage shall be placed within the larger context of the book of Hebrews in order that the God-breathed usefulness for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness might be made patently clear and desperately relevant.

What is it, then, that occasioned the author to write these verses? In 10.19 there comes a transition, marked by the coordinating conjunction *oun*, from the discussion of Christ's once for all sacrifice to the good and necessary responses in the Christian's life. This preceding passage, perhaps one of the most soul-stirring encouragements in Scripture, includes three hortatory subjunctive calls; let us draw near (*proserchōmetha*), let us hold fast (*katechōmen*), let us consider (*katanoōmen*). It is this third exhortation which sets the stage for verses 26-31. The author writes in verses 24-25, 'let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day

drawing near.’ Unfortunately, some modern translations, seeking a more dynamic equivalence have chosen to translate the two participles in verse 25 as further exhortations. While in application their translation does not lead readers astray, what is lost is the coordinate nature of verse 25 to verse 24. That is to say, the manner in which one obediently puts into practice the stimulation to love and good deeds of verse 24, in the view of the author here, is by not forsaking the assembly and instead encouraging one another. This, he thinks, ought to be the natural course of life for the Christian, which he then punctuates with the final phrase of verse 25. If this ought to be the normal everyday routine, how much more so ought it be since ‘the day’ (*tēn hēmeran*), that is, the day when Christ will return in glory, is fast approaching?

And so, it is with this sound of ‘the day’ ringing in the ears that Auctor writes ‘*Hekousiōs gar*’, ‘For (if) willfully/deliberately/intentionally’. There is, therefore, an intimate connection between verses 26 and 25. Attridge, noting another striking feature to this opening phrase writes, ‘The stern warning begins sonorously with a marked assonance.’⁹ (9. Note *hekousiōs, hamartanontōn hēmōn*). These features have the effect of causing this verse to stand out strong against what has just been written.

But what is it about ‘willfully sinning’ that the author wishes the readers to see? Many commentators have made a connection between this ‘willfulness’ of *Hekousiōs* and ‘with a high hand’ (*bəyād rāmā^h*.) of the Biblical Hebrew. This concept in *torah* is exemplified in Numbers 15.30 where the one who ‘does anything with a high hand,’ that is to say deliberately, knowing that it is unlawful, is to be cut off from the people because his sin brings defilement to the camp. The surrounding context of Numbers 15.30 gives provisions for those who sin unintentionally (*akousiōs*), which shows that God knows that the people will not perfectly keep the law, but that He does expect that when they realize they have sinned against Him they go and make the appropriate sacrifices to atone for their sin. It is to the intentional sinner that there is no sacrifice available; his guilt will lie on him until his judgment. In bringing this passage of the Old Testament to bear upon Christians, under the New Covenant, because *all* Scripture is God-breathed, it must be recognized that as the people of Israel were to ‘be holy’ as God is holy so now is the church of God, in Jesus Christ, to be holy. Therefore, the one who sins willfully is akin to the one who sins with a high hand in Numbers. Moreover, if that association be true, then also is *Auctor’s* assessment of that person’s outcome.

That outcome, where no sacrifice remains, must be understood within the context of the chapter. *Auctor* has written in vv.1-18 of how Jesus’ sacrifice supersedes that of the Levitical system. The law, being only a shadow of the things to come, necessitated a continuous cycle of sacrifices, the *ne plus ultra* being that which was performed on the Day of Atonement, which would atone for the sin of the nation. Jesus’ sacrifice, however, is superior due to its once-for-all nature. Consequently, once Jesus hung upon the cross and was raised again,

that act which vindicated the offering of his life, the Levitical system was abolished. In truth, the author believes that once Jeremiah prophesied that a 'new' covenant was going to be made, the old covenant was made obsolete. In the same way that a lame duck president retains his authority until such time as his term is over, so too did the Levitical law retain authority, until that time when Christ came and made the final sacrifice. Thus, when the author writes that no sacrifice remains for the willful sinner he infers that that person cannot turn to the Levitical system for atonement. That system has finally passed away and only Christ remains. Therefore, when the sinner turns his back on Christ he leaves all hope for atonement behind. It is this type of a *fortiori* argument that *Auctor* picks up in verses 28 and 29.

Prior to unpacking what *does* remain for the willful sinner, a word must be said about the phrase '*meta to labein tēn epignōsin tēs alētheias.*' The reason why one can sin willfully is on account of the 'salvation-event' of repentance and faith in Christ. Before this event humans are dead in their sins and completely incapable of doing anything other than sin. This *non posse non peccare* condition of fallen man, while holding him entirely guilty before the righteous Lord, means that he cannot sin 'with a high hand'. It is only 'after receiving the knowledge of the truth' that one can choose to turn one's back to that truth. It has been noted that this phrase, due to its atypical language for the author, may well be an early Christian formula. It can be seen in various forms in the Pastoral Epistles and the Johannine corpus. While this 'formula' can only be posited and not verified, it does not affect the meaning of the author here. Once the readers came to know the truth it set them free, and in being set free they became capable of willfully sinning against the God who saved them.

If, then, no sacrifice remains, what is in store for the one who turns his back on the faith? The only option in the mind of the author is a fearful expectation. This expectation is twofold: of judgment, and of raging fire that consumes the adversaries. Here the author's Jewish apocalyptic view of existence shapes his understanding of the outcome of sinners and saints. The previous pericope, vv.19-25, ended with a hopeful looking forward to 'the day' when Christ will return. For those who persevere, who with faith obey the hortatory subjunctives of this passage, there is hope for the coming of Christ. *Auctor*, here, contrasts that hopefulness with the 'fearful expectation' (*phobera tis eukdochē*) which resides in the hearts of those who know that this return is coming yet persist in their sinful ways.

It must be noted that the *tis* functions as an intensifier. *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* states one possible meaning of the word as, 'heightening quality or quantity in rhetorical emphasis *only* (HE 2.7, 9; 10.27)'. Most modern translations leave this word untranslated, but some attempt to convey the intense meaning the author intended. What they attempt to show is that all that remains for the willful sinner is fearful expectation. This, then, leads to the subject matter of the expectation, which is of judgment and 'zealous' fire. It

is in regards to these two expectations that commentators have seen allusions to the Old Testament. Both Zephaniah 1.18 and Isaiah 26.11 contain similar language and concepts to this verse in Hebrews. It is as the author has written about in 9.27-28 - once a man dies he faces judgment, which for believers is a glorious day since Christ has already faced the wrath that was waiting for them. However, for those who are not identified with Christ there remains only condemnation. The horrid situation in which the willful sinner finds himself is due precisely to the fact that he understands that this judgment is the assured end to come. No matter how deep he tries to hide it, there is always a nagging thought in the back of his head trying to be heard. The hope that is found in the life of the believer does not exist in the one who has turned his back on his Savior and now lives in and for himself.

The language used by the author here is striking. One cannot read of the zealous fire which consumes the adversaries without pictures being painted in the mind of how a holy God is jealous for his honor. It is as He says in Ezekiel 36.22-23, it is for *His* holy name that He is going to bring Israel back from exile, give them new hearts of flesh, and cleanse them with pure water. This fire recalls the story of Korah and his followers in Numbers 16.1-35 and of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10.1-3. Moreover, *Auctor* in 12.29 will go on to quote a portion of Deuteronomy 4.24, 'God is a consuming fire.' What he leaves out in that verse is just as striking as what he has quoted, 'a jealous God'. The Hebrew word *qannā*' used here, meaning jealous, is the root from which the 'jealousy/zeal' of Zeph. 1.18 and Isa 26.11 derive. It is, in ways such as these, that this imagery of fire jealously consuming finds its birth in the Old Testament texts and is brought to new life here in Hebrews. It consumes its adversaries, literally the 'over-against' ones, precisely because they stand up and declare themselves to be their own lords, when there is only one true LORD. In seeking to keep this intense imagery in the context of the argument here in Hebrews it must be remembered that the author is in the midst of encouraging the church to persevere in its fight of the faith with the hortatory subjunctives of vv.19-25 and the call to remember how they have withstood for Christ in the past in vv.32-39. Thus, the thrust of the verse is to ignite the mind to the realities of bowing to the pressure to forget the faith.

What follows this statement, then, is a proof of the validity of the author's argument from Scripture. Lane astutely recognizes that, 'The form of the argument in vv. 28-29 is anticipated in 2:2-3, where the law is designated as "the message spoken by angels." There the writer used a rhetorical question to drive home his point that if disregard for the Mosaic law was appropriately punished, neglect of the salvation announced in the gospel must inevitably be catastrophic. This point is taken up again here, but it is now sharpened by the allusion to Deut 17:6 in v 28 and by the delineation in v 29 of the effects of disregarding a salvation as great as Christians enjoy.' The readers of the letter would have been keenly aware of the provisions in the law for the trying of the accused. This was the standard of the Jewish law system, as can be seen in the trial of Jesus by the

Sanhedrin, when, seeking to bring some accusation against Christ, they brought forward witnesses with the intent of finding some word against him that could be confirmed by another. The point of the author in using the *a fortiori* argument here is to highlight the vast superiority of the salvation brought by Christ against the Law. The strength which this argument has here is also based upon the context from which he derives the example. Deuteronomy 17.2-7 contains the regulations concerning the prosecution of those found in idolatry, which, for the author, is point in fact what those who continue to willfully sin after receiving the knowledge of the truth are doing. They are involved in the worship of the self over and above that of God. That is to say, when one, knowing what the Lord has spoken, willfully does otherwise, he is serving himself over God, which is none other than bowing down to oneself rather than the holy God. Strengthened as he is by the original context *Auctor* brilliantly builds on his argument of superiority by stating that if this is the manner of justice one was to be dealt with under the old administration how much more severely would one be dealt with under the new.

The rhetorical prowess of the author is shown again in his use of *dokeite*, with which he draws the readers to actively engage in the discussion at hand. What he desires them to deduce is, considering the punishment for rejecting the Law, what ought to be done to those who reject the work of Christ? He has already answered the question in v.27 yet the raising of the question causes the mind to focus again on the fearful expectation and in doing so to realize that there is no other punishment suitable. Eternal judgment and zealous holy fire are the only available course. Grammatically, the author draws attention to the nature of the apostate by placing the specific actions in front of the attributive participles from which they derive. Theologically, these three descriptions have been the source of much debate and confusion throughout church history. It seems, though, that the appropriate course of action in understanding the meaning of this verse is to take these not as particular sinful actions, but rather as a characterization, in vivid metaphors, of the repudiation of the new covenant. That is to say, that the one who tramples the Son of God underfoot has, by default, considered the blood of the covenant unholy, which is simultaneously an insult to the Spirit of grace. Accordingly, if one is to evaluate a believer who is in danger of true apostasy then that person will exhibit a lifestyle that reflects these characterizations. To trample the Son of God underfoot, as Delitzsch says, 'is not merely to reject or cast away as something unfit for use which men carelessly tread upon (Matt. v.13; Luke viii.5), but to trample down with ruthless contempt as an object of scorn or hatred (Matt. vii.6).'

It is this kind of contempt which *katapateō* connotes and it is with this type of scorn that one can look (*hēgeomai*) at the blood of Jesus, the blood of the covenant which sanctified him, and consider it as unholy. What has caused much confusion with this phrase is the question of how one can be sanctified and then not so. In the context of the book of Hebrews the author is constantly warning of how it is possible to fall away from the faith. He has used the illustration of the Israelites wandering in the desert and not entering the rest of God as an example

for the readers. It is in that sense that the Israelites had been sanctified by God as His people and yet through their disobedience were not allowed entrance to the rest. Thus, there may be those in the church who are identified as part of the church yet do not have that kind of persevering faith which will, in the end, be shown as true saving faith. In some sense they are sanctified, set apart from the rest of the world, yet in the end that physical set-apartness does nothing for the spiritual problem of sin before a holy God. It is, by consequence, this spiritual problem of sin which causes the apostate to willfully consider the blood of Christ and count it nothing of worth. These actions, of scorn (*katapatēsas*) and considering unholy (*koinon hēgēsamenos*), are finally an insult to the Spirit of grace. God has extended the hand of mercy and grace to sinful humans and yet some spurn that hand. As the author asks his audience, how great is the punishment deserved from this wicked action?

Auctor now confirms his argument from vv.28-29 with an appeal to Scripture. Both of the quotations from v.30 are from Moses' song found in Deuteronomy 32. It is here where one can gain a better understanding of the author's hermeneutic of the Old Testament texts. This study must begin by looking at the meaning of the quotations in their original context. Moses composed this song so that the people would learn it and teach it to future generations. It is a lesson in the trust of the Lord. The first verse *Auctor* quotes is v.35. What is seen here is very interesting. The first half of the quotation follows the textual tradition of the MT while the second half conforms to the LXX. Commentators note that it is unlikely that the author decided to use the MT here over the LXX. What is more probable is that the LXX reading is the original and the MT has been corrupted. This, however, does not solve the problem of quotation, which is a compilation of two translations. What does help is the fact that the reading in Hebrews is attested to in the Targums as well as Romans 12.19. Understanding from where the text comes is the starting point to understanding the author's interpretation. Originally Moses meant that the YHWH will have vengeance upon the pagans who have defiled the land with their gods; He will have justice on them. Continuing with the original context, it is seen, then, that v.36, from which *Auctor* takes his second quotation word for word, is meant to be that YHWH will judge/vindicate his people. This is supported by the fact that the second colon speaks of his compassion on them. If these two verses mean what they do, how then does the author of Hebrews arrive at the meaning to which he does?

It does not seem as if he has changed the meaning of the first quotation. All he has done is reiterate the fact that God is a holy God and will not stand for impiety towards Himself; He will, in the end, have his justice. Sin is an infinite offense before an infinite God and as the author has spent the last two verses, indeed the whole of the book, showing how Christ is the culmination of God's redemptive work in history, he drives home the point that those who remain in their sin will be punished for their deeds. However, if the Christian community dares to presume upon the grace of God, as the Israelites did all too often, the

second quotation ought to drive them to their knees in adoration and repentance. Originally a statement of the Lord's vindication of his people, this quote is now framed as a warning to those who would become lax in their faith, perhaps even to the point of becoming one of these 'willful sinners.'

If these two quotations are not enough to cause his readers to consider their ways, as is his intent, then verse 31 ought to do so. The beauty of the verse is in its effect on its readers. The statement '*cheiras theou zōntos*' is pregnant with meaning. God is the Living God, that is, He is the source of all life and is also living and active, and He is also powerful, both to save and to punish. For those who are caught in a web of sin this verse only serves to highlight the dread of judgment that they will face. For that person it is a much worse thing to fall into God's holy and mighty hands than simply to face death. Whereas, for the one who stands resolute in his faith, who with a full heart is a doer of all that was encouraged in vv.19-25, the dread is not so much of impending judgment but rather the reverential awe of a sinful person before a holy God.

Having now seen how the author constructed his argument in vv.26-31 a word must be said on how this pericope fits within the larger structure of the book of Hebrews. As was noted in a footnote earlier, the passage falls within the larger, three-part structure of 10.19-39. Verses 19-25 are a positive encouragement to continue in the faith, verses 26-31 are the negative discouragements to stay away from, and verses 32-39 return to a positive light in calling the readers to remember when they had withstood persecutions in the past and how they ought to do the same now. There is a stirring quotation of Habakkuk 2.3-4 where the author exhorts his readers to be 'my righteous one' and live by the faith which the letter has been teaching. His statement in v.39, 'But we are not of those...' stands in contrast to the warnings of vv.26-31. Whereas the passage studied here was one of 'If we', this verses boldly claims 'But we'. This is a brilliant rhetorical device used to raise up within the readers a stirring that says, 'Yes, we are not ones who shrink back, we will stand firm.'

In widening the focus of the context to the whole of the book of Hebrews it can be seen that vv.26-31 have a close parallel in 6.4-8. Rather than strictly a reiteration of what he has said before, 10.26-31 stands on its own due to the reliance on the *a fortiori* argument of the superiority of Christ over the Levitical cultus. With that being said, however, it must not be overlooked that the author is a master of weaving thoughts and streams of argumentation in and out of his letter. Thus, these two passages, while distinct are also closely linked, in that they are a warning to believers not to become so lax in the faith that they consider the ways of the world as more worthwhile than Christ. It is that focus which the author desires the readers to see; Christ is supreme, He is the ultimate, and for that reason believers ought to cling tightly to Him and Him alone.

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