

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Website: www.churchredeemeraz.org

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Gary L. W. Johnson

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THE ADMONITION TO PERSEVERE (PART III)

Joel Osteen, pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, held a grand service for the first time in Hawaii, at the “Night of Hope” worship event on Friday, Feb. 3. During his visit to the state, Osteen was asked by local media to address accusations that he preaches a *watered-down* Gospel. He responded declaring “I think, for years, people have been pushed down by religion, and I don’t say that disrespectfully, but they’ve been shown a God that you can’t measure up to,” the Texas pastor told the crowd, according to the Hawaii News Now. “And so, my goal is to make God good and let them know, hey, I tell them all the time, God’s smiling down on you right now. You’re his child. He’s got a great plan for your life. You can overcome mistakes, and to me, that draws people to God.” He continued, adding as the crowd cheered: “You are victors, not victims!” Osteen went on to address accusations that his sermons only focus on receiving prosperity from God – which some critics interpret to mean money. The Lakewood Church pastor, and bestselling author, has been identified as one of America’s wealthiest pastors. “I don’t go up there and talk about money. I talk about: God wants you to be blessed and have good relationships and be healthy. And I think the opposite is: Some people want you to think that you’re supposed to be poor and broke and suffer to show that you’re a Christian, and that’s just not the way I read the Scripture. I think that God wants us to excel and be the best at what we can do and have happy families. You know, prosperity, to me, is more than money; it’s health and good relationships...peace of mind.” Osteen explained.¹ If you have ever watched a service from Osteen’s church on TV, he always begins by holding up a Bible and having the congregation repeat after him that they believe all that the Bible has to say – he then promptly ignores it in his sermon! Either he has *never* read the book of Hebrews or he simply chooses to disregard whatever goes contrary to his picture of God. “God is a God of Grace and Judgment,” said John Piper. If the real world that God has created includes the reality of divine judgment and vengeance and the terrifying, furious fire of God’s wrath, then honesty and love and wisdom will all include warnings of danger, not just promises of blessing. We live in a strange time. On the one hand, it’s a time that is shot through with agony and catastrophe and tragedy and violence and suffering of every kind. We see it day in and day out in the papers and on the TV news. And those who are thoughtful and large-minded know that we are seeing the barest tip of an iceberg of hate and greed and injustice and brutality around the world, not to mention the millions upon millions of starving and utterly destitute poor in the world and the agonizing situations of tens of thousands of refugees. But on the other hand, we do not want to hear about it. We are soft people. While most of the world watches death every day without morphine or any medical help, and deals with deep gashes and amputations with no antiseptics or stitches, we gag at the sight of a dead dog and grumble when 911 takes five minutes to respond instead of three. We are soft and we are presumptuous. And, what’s most appalling, though very few regard it as most appalling, is that when it comes to God, all we want to hear is the sweet side, the tender side, the warm side. We believe that the only good motivation comes from hearing about grace, not judgment. And little by little we let that motivational conviction (as unbiblical as it is) creep into our view of God himself, until we have no categories anymore to understand, let alone love, a God whose wrath is a fury of fire against sinners. But the writer of this book of Hebrews will not be silent about the wrath of God. It is a book

utterly devoted to living by faith in future grace. O, the grace of God in this book! Chapter after chapter celebrates the glorious provision of God in Jesus Christ to free us from our sin and turn our future into a paradise of hope. The book begins and ends with Christ making purification for sins and sitting down at the right hand of God, our perfect sacrifice and priest and shepherd, who will never leave us or forsake us. But, like no other book of the New Testament, this book is also relentless in its warnings about the dangers of carelessness in the Christian life. And the warnings are not that we might forfeit a few heavenly rewards, but that we might forfeit our souls in the fury of God's wrath. So here is a book that stands against the motivational assumption that only motivating news is good news. There is both the promise of joy and the warning of pain. We saw it in 2:3, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation." We saw it in 3:11-12, "As I swore in my wrath, they shall never enter my rest. Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God." We saw it in 6:4, 6, "It is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened...if they then commit apostasy... [they are like land that is] worthless and near to being cursed."²

I. GOD IS A CONSUMING FIRE

Notice that this description of God is directly connected with the absence of a sacrifice for sin. 10:19-39 is transitional material which exhorts the readers on the basis of the previous discussion (10:19-25), warns them of the punishment for "spurning" the Son of God, whose blood is the blood of the new covenant (10:26-31) and reminds them of their need for endurance in the struggle they face (10:32-39). The warning itself is directed against ongoing sin (cf. the present tense of the participle *hamartanonton*). This sin is deliberate, the note of willfulness being emphasized by the position of *hekousios* which echoes (but not precisely) the distinctions in Numbers 15:22-31. Such sin occurs after receiving the knowledge of the truth (10:26), which was a standard way of referring to making a profession of faith and is parallel to the description of Christian experience in 6:4-5. The argument is expanded by use of another *a fortiori* argument involving the threat of punishment under the old order. A greater punishment than the merciless retribution laid down by the Mosaic Law for murder, false prophecy, idolatry, and blasphemy is to be meted out on those who commit this deliberate ongoing sin.³

II. THE FATE OF THOSE WHO ABANDON THE FAITH

Apostasy is seen in three aspects.

A. The act of trampling upon the Son of God

The sin in mind is therefore clearly seen as "willful apostasy," which leads some to leave the Church (10:25). The readers are invited to consider the implications for themselves (*dokeite*). As in 6:4-8 there is no "way forward" for those who commit this most heinous of sins against the Son of God (the same title for Christ used in 6:6). The warnings this time are much more explicit and terrifying than any of those previously delivered. In 2:1-4 there was only brief mention of "just retribution"; in 6:4-8 there was the merest intimation of punishment of the apostate in the illustration of 6:8; in 3:7-4:13 the thought was of falling short of God's rest but not of the punishment this would incur. Here in 10:26-31, however, the note of punishment is uppermost and is driven home by the use of the powerful images in 10:27, two scriptural quotations on the theme of God as the avenging judge (10:30) and a strong asyndetic sentence (10:31). The note of fear is captured by the inclusio between *phobera* (10:27) and *phoberon* (10:31). As the writer elaborates the gospel more and more clearly, showing the superiority of Christ and the insufficiency of the Old Covenant, the warnings become more severe. The implications of apostasy become starker as our understanding of the gospel becomes more mature, and as the writer explains that gospel ever more clearly. The purpose of the warnings in 10:26-31, then, is to warn the 'Hebrews' of the implications of rejecting the great high priest who has secured our entry into the sanctuary by his own blood thus inaugurating the new covenant – an understanding of the work of Christ developed from Jeremiah 31, the author's fourth major Old Testament text.

B. Contempt for the Cross

The blood of Christ is what established the new covenant. The apostate, by turning away, treats the blood of the covenant as unimportant. The expression *by which they were sanctified* has been interpreted in a number of ways. Some (typically Armenians) have argued that it *must* be

understood strictly as referring to genuine Christians. However, the Greek word *HAGIAZO* has a wide semantic range. Wayne Grudem points to Heb. 9:13 as an example where the word refers to rendering someone ceremonially clean but not necessarily spiritually (or savingly) clean. See also 1 Cor. 7:14; Matthew 23:17, 19; 1 Timothy 4:5. The context in Hebrews 10 appears to support this view, as our author is concerned with parallels between the OT Levitical sacrifice and the better new covenant sacrifice of Christ. Says Grudem: “The author of Hebrews knows that some may fall away, even though they assemble with the congregation of believers and so share in this great privilege of coming before God [see 10:19-22]. So he says, ‘not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another’ (10:25). The reason to encourage one another is the warning in 10:26, ‘For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth.’ In such a context, it is appropriate to understand ‘profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified’ to mean ‘by which he was given the privilege of coming before God with the congregation of God’s people.’ In this sense, the blood of Christ opened up a new way of access to God for the congregation – it ‘sanctified’ them in a parallel to the Old Testament ceremonial sense – and this person, by associating with the congregation, was also ‘sanctified’ in that sense: He or she had the privilege of coming before God in worship. Someone who has experienced that awesome opportunity and privilege only then to willfully repudiate the person and work of Christ through whom it was made possible can expect only judgment. Consistent with this, our author then proceeds to distinguish between two groups in 10:39. There are, on the one hand, those who do not have saving faith and thus eventually fall away (“shrink back”) into destruction. On the other hand, there are those who have saving faith and thus persevere to the preserving of the soul. He doesn’t envision a third group: Those who have saving faith and later fall away.”⁴

C. Insult The Spirit of Grace

This is an assault of insolence against the Holy Spirit. My late professor of theology, S. Lewis Johnson, summed it up this way: “You notice here we have in the first case the act of trampling on the Son, then counting the covenantal blood of the Lord God in heaven common, and then insolence against the Spirit or insulting the Spirit, and so the Trinity is involved; the Father, the Son and the Spirit, it seems. And so the Spirit is despised in the sense that the displays of the evidences of salvation are not taken as being real. Remember in chapter 2 in verse 4, where the author writes, “God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to his own will.” These are individuals who have seen the manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the Gospel, but they’ve rejected it. Just like in our Lord’s case, and when he had performed the miracles they said, “He does his miracles by means of Beelzebub.” And our Lord, then, talks about the eternal sin against the Holy Spirit. And in this case, it would seem that unpardonable sin.”⁵

CONCLUSION: To abandon the appointed public means of grace (forsaking the assembling of the church) is the first step down the path of apostasy. “They went out from us, because they were not of us. If they had been of us, they surely would have continued with us or they would have continued with us.” (1 John 2:19). However, there are churches – like that of Joel Osteen – where Christ and Him crucified are rarely, if ever, mentioned. Such churches are breeding grounds for apostasy. Kistemaker rightly wrote: “Sermons ought to proclaim the gospel of salvation, the call to repentance, the assurance of pardon, and the message of reconciliation between God and man. Proportionally, Scripture says little about God’s burning wrath that consumes his enemies. If Scripture sets the example, we should follow its practice. Nevertheless, no preacher may fail to warn the people of the dire consequences of turning away from the living God. The recurring theme of the Epistle of Hebrews is one of warning God’s people. The terrifying consequences of living a life of intentional sin ought to be mentioned in sermons. In Hebrews we read that every believer has the responsibility to seek the spiritual welfare of his fellow Christians. We may call this corporate responsibility because it is our mutual task. And pastors may refer to hellfire in their sermons, for such a warning also belongs to the full message of God’s revelation. As the pastor warns the wayward, so he encourages the faint-hearted. A believer may lack the assurance of salvation, fearing that he has

committed the sin against the Holy Spirit. But the unpardonable sin cannot be attributed to a person who doubts his or her salvation. Only the person who demonstrates an open and deliberate hatred toward God, divine revelation, and Christ's accomplished work of salvation has committed that sin. The doubter, then, needs words of encouragement. He should be invited to repeat the reassuring words of Paul, "Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day" (II Tim. 1:12)."⁶

Endnotes

¹ <http://www.christainpost.com/news/joel-osteen-addresses-accusations-of-teach-watered...>

² <http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper97/4-13-97a.htm>

³ I owe much of the exegetical analysis of this passage to Lee Gatiss for his handling of the warning passages in Hebrews. <http://www.theologian.org.uk/bible/hebrews-warnings.html>

⁴ W. Grudem *Systematic Theology* as cited by Sam Storms <http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/article/hebrews-1026-31-and-the-possibility-of-apo...>

⁵ <http://www.sljinstitute.net/sermons/new%20testament/general/pages/hebrews33.html>

⁶ S.J. Kistemaker, *Hebrews: New Testament Commentary* (Baker, 1984) p. 247