Teaching Hebrews | What about the Warning Passages?

Steven W. Smith

What are the warning passages?

The warning passages are the five passages in the book that give a warning against “falling away” from the faith.

- Hebrews 2:1–4
- Hebrews 3:7–4:13
- Hebrews 5:11–6:12
- Hebrews 10:19–39
- Hebrews 12:1–29

Why are they so critical?

These passages are critical for the simple reason that there will be people sitting in the classroom to whom the warnings really apply. There is also a secondary reason that it is very important: some genuinely doubt their salvation. You will have the opportunity to clear this up for them. The cavalier will be warned and the disheartened will be comforted. Both of these can be done with this passage.

What do they not teach?

They do not teach that one can “lose” salvation. How can we be so confident? There are many reasons we know that these passages are not teaching of a loss of the faith. We know that Scripture cannot contradict Scripture. The first rule of interpretation, therefore, is to interpret Scripture in light of Scripture. In other words, when we don’t understand something in Scripture, we are encouraged to work from what we do know, then apply it to what we don’t know.

There are numerous passages that teach that the believer in Christ is completely secure (John 10:29; Romans 8:31–39; Ephesians 2:4–10). A simple reading of Scripture can cause us to assert that since we did not secure our salvation, we cannot lose it. This has been given to us. This is not something we have earned.

Remember, the Bible is a pastoral book. The Bible is a parental book. As a parent, you must love and encourage your children. There are times when you must threaten and warn your children. Both are needed for different times in their development. In this way, Scripture is both affirmation and warning. The secret is to take the individual Scriptures in light of the whole. So, taken as a whole, Scripture affirms the total security

So, how does a reading of the whole of Scripture inform our reading of the warning passages of Hebrews? Simple: the warning passages in Hebrews are warnings that remind us of a promise.

Here is the warning: “If you do not persevere, you will not be saved.”

Here is the promise: “Christ gives you the power to persevere.”

So the warning is to those who make little of Christ, and the promise to those who make much of Christ. In both cases, the exaltation of Christ is the principle concern. So a practical lesson from these texts is to make much of Christ always. He created all (Colossians 1:15–16); He sustains all (Colossians 1:17); and ultimately He will judge all (Romans 2:16, 2 Corinthians 5:10). The whole of God’s plan is to exalt Christ (Philippians 2:9–11). Therefore, making little of Christ (i.e., not focusing on Him) will cause one to be judged by God. Ignoring Christ is the singular mark of an unbeliever who is storing up God’s future judgment.

What do they teach?

Of the many interpretations throughout church history, here are two possible interpretations to these passages that are consistent with the whole of Scripture.

1. **These are a warning against spiritual drift and loss of reward.**

   In this view, true believers are being warned against a Christianity that does not focus on Christ. In other words, the warning is against believers who might drift away from Christ and not have the full working out of their salvation. Thus they are justified (in Christ), and will be glorified (go to heaven) but they are not being sanctified (focusing on Christ so they are made holy).

   The book is certainly written to the church. And it is true that the believers are not warned about losing their salvation; rather, they are warned about spiritual drift. If they do not focus on Christ, they will drift away (Hebrews 2:1) and lose spiritual rewards (Hebrews 6:6). That “they cannot be restored” in Hebrews 6:6 would mean, according to this view, that they can keep their salvation, yet they will not have the full restoration of heavenly rewards. They are saved, but they have no reward when they get to heaven.

   The advantages of this view are that, no doubt, the book is written to the church. Why would this include a warning to unbelievers when this would be
read to the church? This view also protects one from going down the slippery slope toward loss of salvation.

The challenge with this view is quite simply the strength of the warnings themselves. One has to be comfortable with interpreting these severe warnings, as warnings against acting in sub-Christian ways: “fall away” in 6:1 as falling away from a good relationship with Christ; “Cannot be restored” in 6:6 as loss of rewards; “drifting” in 2:1 as simply not focusing on Christ.

2. **These are a warning to those in the community of believers who are not truly believers.**

It is possible that the writer is writing to the community that gathers each Sunday, the whole group. He knows that in this group, there are some fake among the real. In this view, he is not writing to the “church,” strictly defined as all those who are really in Christ, but rather to the community that gathers calling themselves the church. He does so with the knowledge that not all who call themselves Christians truly are.

This is consistent with the teaching of Jesus. He said that there will be sheep among the goats (Matthew 25:31–46) and weeds among the wheat (Matthew 13:24–30; 36–43). Jesus was always honest about the fact that there would be fake among the real, a Judas among the disciples.

In this view, you would paraphrase Hebrews 2:1–4 this way:

Be careful that you focus on Christ. If you don’t keep your focus on Christ, you will drift away and will prove that you really never knew Christ to begin with.

These are the ones to whom John writes in 1 John 1:19:

> They went out from us for they were not of us; if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that is might become plain that they all are not of us.

This is also like the seed that Jesus described in Matthew 13:22. It survived for a little while, but then withered away. It is not a true plant, but we don’t know that yet because it has not been truly exposed. It looks like the real thing. Therefore, it needs to be warned.
The challenges to this view include the fact that some are uncomfortable suggesting that the writer could be addressing non-Christians in a book written to Christians.

**How do you teach them?**

Here is the most important question: How do we teach them? Let’s be honest, this would be a great passage to skip over. Just simply gloss over this and no one will be the wiser. Start the lesson with a good story and end it with a good joke and perhaps no one will notice that you just glossed one of the most important passages in the Bible. Right? Unfortunately, no. We must **teach the warning passages as they are presented: with humility, fear and hopefulness. Let’s break this down.**

**Teach them: Don’t ignore the text.** Let’s be honest, if you could ever use the excuse “I’m not a pastor, just a Bible Fellowship teacher,” it is now. However, that’s no good. Since you are holding your Bible in front of the people, you are responsible for their understanding of this passage. You are not responsible to make them agree with you. You are not responsible to make them respond appropriately. You are responsible to make the text clear. These texts cannot be avoided.

1. **Teach them as they are presented: Let the text develop naturally.**

   This is a real warning against a real danger. There are people you will be teaching who are genuinely “falling away.” The warning is real, so the potential danger is real as well. Teach them accordingly.

   The secret to this is to let the passage develop as it does. Meaning, when you read the passage on face value, it bites and stings. So, let it bite and sting.

   You might think, “But what if they think I am teaching them to doubt their salvation?” You can make that abundantly clear ... later. There should be no doubt that you believe that we are all kept in Christ. However, if the warning is to have the same rhetorical impact that it did when it was originally taught, we need to honor that warning.

   If you go to a town hall meeting and learn that the city will soon be swallowed by a giant sinkhole, you should be scared. As a teacher, you are liable if you represent this knowledge, in a passive, take-it-or-leave-it sort of way. That is information that you need to shout! So make the warning real by following along with the text of Scripture and letting it develop.
Think of the metaphor of a cinematographer. To really communicate you must both zoom in and pan out.

- **Zoom into the text first** – Let it bite and sting, and even confuse. Then...

- **Pan out of the text** – Let them see to whom the warning was addressed and affirm that we are kept in Christ.

2. **Teach them: With Humility**

   We don’t have the corner on the text and they should know this. Yet, remind them that if there are limitations to the text, it is in our understanding and not in the Scriptures.

3. **Teach them: With Fear**

   These are sobering texts. When fully explained, the lighthearted vibe infused in the Bible study atmosphere may seep out like a popped balloon. That’s OK. Let it. There are other times to have a lighthearted moment.

4. **Teach them: With Hopefulness**

   The purpose of these passages is not just to warn, but to save! Because you did the difficult work to teach this passage and explain it as it was presented, some will respond. They will quit playing church games, repent, and be saved. This is our hope!