

# HEBREWS

## Introduction

I have an alternate title I'd like to suggest for the Book of Hebrews. I'd call it, "*I'm Warning You.*"

You encounter five warning passages as you read through the book. They warn against five dangers. We're going to read them one-by-one.

1. Turn to chapter two. In verses one through three you are warned, "*Do not drift away.*"

Hebrews 2:1 Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, **lest we drift away.**

Hebrews 2:2 For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward,

Hebrews 2:3 how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation...

2. Turn to chapter three. In verses seven through twelve you are warned, "*Do not disbelieve.*"

Hebrews 3:7 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: "*Today, if you will hear His voice,*

Hebrews 3:8 *Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness,*

Hebrews 3:9 *Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, and saw My works forty years.*

Hebrews 3:10 *Therefore I was angry with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways.'*

Hebrews 3:11 *So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.'"*

Hebrews 3:12 Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of **unbelief** in departing from the living God;

3. Turn to chapter five. In verses eleven through fourteen you are warned, "*Do not become dull of hearing.*"

Hebrews 5:11 of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become **dull of hearing.**

Hebrews 5:12 For 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.

Hebrews 5:13 For everyone who partakes *only* of milk *is* unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe.

Hebrews 5:14 But 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.

4. Turn to chapter ten. In verses thirty-five through thirty-eight you are warned, “Do not draw back.”

Hebrews 10:35 Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward.

Hebrews 10:36 For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise:

Hebrews 10:37 “*For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry.*”

Hebrews 10:38 *Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone **draws back**, My soul has no pleasure in him.*”

5. Turn to chapter twelve. In verse twenty-five you are warned, “Do not depart.”

Hebrews 12:25 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,

“Refuse” and “turn away” carry the idea of *departing*. The last phrase is an appropriate summary for all five of the warnings; it can be translated, “Him Who warns from heaven.”

These warnings are serious... **And so are the consequences of refusing to heed them.** Turn back to chapter six and you’ll see just how serious. In the middle of the warning to not be dull of hearing you read,

Hebrews 6:1 Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary *principles* of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God,

Hebrews 6:2 of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.

Hebrews 6:3 And this we will do if God permits.

Hebrews 6:4 **For it is impossible** for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit,

Hebrews 6:5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come,

Hebrews 6:6 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.

There is a phrase in these verses that should take your breath away. “For it is impossible... to renew them again to repentance.”

I don’t need to tell you that Christians have struggled with these words ever since they were first written. There is still no clear and concise consensus as to their exact application:

1. There are those who claim the author is addressing people who *profess* to be Christians but do not yet *possess* eternal life. They are therefore not saved.
2. There are others who claim the author **is** addressing saved believers. If he is, do they thereby forfeit their eternal salvation and become unsaved by refusing to heed God's warnings?

Whichever position you take you still have trouble understanding why it is "impossible... to renew them again to repentance."

We should not be so arrogant as to think we will resolve a debate that has continued for so long among so many. Still, the Book of Hebrews is here in our Bibles and we must seek to understand and apply it.

I am going to suggest that the Book of Hebrews warns born-again believers about falling short in their experience of victory in the Christian life. It warns **disciples** about these five **dangers** so that we will make spiritual progress and avoid being **disciplined** by the Lord in this life and **disqualified** by the Lord at His reward seat.

We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 Historical Examples Put The Dangers Into Perspective For You, and #2 Heartfelt Exhortations Put Discipleship Into Practice For You.

#### #1 Historical Examples Put The Dangers Into Perspective For You

We're not sure who wrote Hebrews. The majority opinion is that it was Paul; others suggest Peter or Apollos or Barnabas; still others suggest Luke or Silas or Priscilla. It is probably fitting that we don't know since the book so highly exalts the Person of Jesus Christ.

It becomes obvious as you read the Book of Hebrews that the original audience to whom it was written were Jewish. They were Hebrews who had embraced the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As a result of identifying with Jesus as Messiah they were suffering from intense religious persecution. In order to avoid further suffering they were considering returning to the Jewish Temple with its ceremonies and sacrifices. Through a series of profound arguments the writer proves

that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the Jewish ceremonies and sacrifices.

The author frequently points his readers back to the Old Testament historical accounts that they are familiar with. These Old Testament examples are far more important than we realize. They hold the key to the proper understanding of the message of the book.

You should still have your Bible's open to chapter six. Look at verse twelve:

Hebrews 6:12 that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

We have a tendency to read this verse and overlook the fact that it is part of an historical example that the author has been using since chapter three. I'll read it to you:

Hebrews 3:8 *Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness,*

Hebrews 3:9 *Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, and saw My works forty years.*

Hebrews 3:10 *Therefore I was angry with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways.'*

Hebrews 3:11 *So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest...'*

Hebrews 3:17 *...Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness?*

Hebrews 3:18 *And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey?*

Hebrews 3:19 *So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.*

When the writer exhorts his readers in 6:12, "do not become sluggish," he is still comparing them to the children of Israel who left Egypt but never entered the Promised Land of Canaan. This example reveals the main message of this difficult passage that says it is "impossible... to renew them again to repentance."

The Book of Exodus opens with the Jews as slaves in Egypt. God raised-up Moses to deliver them. After a series of plagues upon Egypt God sent one final plague: The death of the firstborn in all the land. Every Jew who sacrificed a lamb and put the blood from the lamb on their doorpost was spared. They walked through their door and began their journey to the Promised Land of Canaan.

What they walked into first was a wilderness. By the end of the Book of Exodus they had journeyed as far as Mount Sinai. In The Book of Leviticus, while at Mount Sinai, God gave them the Law and the design for their Tabernacle. In the Book of Numbers the Jews departed from Mount Sinai and marched to a place called Kadesh-barnea.

They were on the very borders of the land God had promised them for their inheritance. Turn with me to chapter thirteen of Numbers. The Jews decided to send spies into the land before they entered it. **It was not God's idea to send spies into the land.** The sending in of the spies denoted a weakness and a fear on the part of the people. God had already been in and spied out the land. He knew all about it. He would not have sent them into the land unless He knew they could take it.

Twelve spies went into the Promised Land and searched it out for a period of forty days. They returned and gave this report:

Numbers 13:26 Now they departed and came back to Moses and Aaron and all the congregation of the children of Israel in the Wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land.

Numbers 13:27 Then they told him, and said: "We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this *is* its fruit.

Numbers 13:28 Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land *are* strong; the cities *are* fortified *and* very large; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there.

Numbers 13:29 The Amalekites dwell in the land of the South; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the banks of the Jordan."

Among the twelve spies sent in were Joshua and Caleb. *They did not agree with the majority opinion!*

Numbers 13:30 Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it."

Their voices were overruled:

Numbers 13:31 But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they *are* stronger than we."

Numbers 13:32 And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone as spies *is* a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it *are* men of *great* stature.

Numbers 13:33 There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."

The Jews had come to a place of decision. They must decide whether to enter God's Promised Land or not. Tragically, they decided not.

God had this to say in chapter fourteen:

Numbers 14:29 The carcasses of you who have complained against Me shall fall in this wilderness, all of you who were numbered, according to your entire number, from twenty years old and above.

Numbers 14:30 Except for Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun, you shall by no means enter the land which I swore I would make you dwell in.

Numbers 14:31 But your little ones, whom you said would be victims, I will bring in, and they shall know the land which you have despised.

Numbers 14:32 But *as for* you, your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness.

Numbers 14:33 And your sons shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years, and bear the brunt of your infidelity, until your carcasses are consumed in the wilderness.

Numbers 14:34 According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for each day you shall bear your guilt one year, *namely* forty years, and you shall know My rejection.

Numbers 14:35 I the LORD have spoken this. I will surely do so to all this evil congregation who are gathered together against Me. In this wilderness they shall be consumed, and there they shall die.”

We're all pretty familiar with the story up to this point. **There is an important sequel we must not overlook.** The people seemed to repent and they made an attempt to enter the Promised Land:

Numbers 14:40 And they rose early in the morning and went up to the top of the mountain, saying, “Here we are, and we will go up to the place which the LORD has promised, for we have sinned!”

Numbers 14:41 And Moses said, “Now why do you transgress the command of the LORD? For this will not succeed.

Numbers 14:42 Do not go up, lest you be defeated by your enemies, for the LORD *is* not among you.

Numbers 14:43 For the Amalekites and the Canaanites *are* there before you, and you shall fall by the sword; because you have turned away from the LORD, the LORD will not be with you.”

Numbers 14:44 But they presumed to go up to the mountaintop. Nevertheless, neither the ark of the covenant of the LORD nor Moses departed from the camp.

Numbers 14:45 Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who dwelt in that mountain came down and attacked them, and drove them back as far as Hormah.

Listen carefully: Although they *repented*, it was now *impossible* for them to enter Canaan. Does that sound familiar? **The writer to the Hebrews says exactly the same thing!** And he **means** exactly the same thing.

The Jews were delivered out of Egypt once-and-for-all but they never entered and enjoyed the blessings in the Promised Land of Canaan.

They stopped short and failed to make the spiritual progress God had intended for them. The first century Jews to whom Hebrews was written were about to make that same mistake by turning from biblical Christianity and back towards Jewish ceremonies and sacrifices.

Is there also an application for you and I who do not have a Jewish background? There is, and you will see it if I give you one more detail. The Promised Land is not a picture of heaven as so many of the old hymns suggest. It was a place of struggle and warfare against enemies, but where victory was already assured to those who would walk by faith. The Promised Land is thus a picture of walking with God by faith in this world, trusting Him for victory in your warfare against your spiritual enemies.

**After you are saved you can choose to go forward with God as His disciple into a life of victory; or you can fall short and fail to make spiritual progress.**

## #2 Heartfelt Exhortations Put Discipleship Into Practice For You

The exhortations in the Book of Hebrews are to born-again believers about falling short in their experience of victory in the Christian life. It warns **disciples** about the **dangers** so that we can avoid being **disciplined** by the Lord in this life and **disqualified** by the Lord at His reward seat.

God loves you as His son or daughter and will **discipline** you, even severely, if necessary. Not every trial or tragedy, sickness or suffering, is a discipline for your falling short. But the New Testament does make it clear that God sometimes goes so far as to even bring believers to a premature death as a discipline. You might remember in the church at Corinth that there was a problem at the Lord's Supper. Some were turning it into a gluttonous, drunken feast. The Scripture says that, as a matter of God's discipline, many were weak, sick, and even dying.<sup>1</sup> God will discipline you in this life to encourage you to press forward as His disciple.

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<sup>1</sup> First Corinthians 11:30

He can also **disqualify** you. Paul spoke of being “disqualified” in First Corinthians 9:27. It is an illustration drawn from track and field. A contestant could be disqualified for any number of reasons and not receive his or her reward after the race was completed. The contestant remained a citizen, but was disqualified from receiving the reward.

Scripture many times compares your spiritual life and its progress to running a race with a reward at the end. In First Corinthians three Paul describes standing before the Judgment Seat of Jesus Christ to receive your rewards. As your life is reviewed some of your work will be disqualified if it was not conducted for the glory of God. It will be burned away. Paul says, “If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but **he himself will be saved**, yet so as through fire.”<sup>2</sup>

Being a disciple who makes spiritual progress is the message of Hebrews. As Warren Wiersbe says, “*Pilgrims should make progress.*”

## Conclusion

One final thought about it being “impossible... to renew [you] again to repentance.”

There *are* certain decisions in your Christian experience that it is “impossible” to repent from. You can repent **of** them if they were sin, but you can’t repent **from** them as to their consequences. Please don’t take my example personally, but I’d say decisions about marriage and divorce are an example of such decisions. They are decisions that, once made, cannot ever be unmade and carry consequences for the rest of your life.

Take a young Christian woman who marries an unbeliever. She fails to heed the warnings, she sins, and she falls short of God’s intended blessings. She cannot be “renewed” to her original state of being single. If she seeks an unbiblical divorce, she only compounds her bad decision.

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<sup>2</sup> First Corinthians 3:15



But I'd quickly add in her case and in every case involving such decisions: **God's grace can nevertheless abound!**

If you find yourself in the wilderness in some area of your life, do not ever despair. **You can't go back, but you can go forward!**

Begin to walk like a disciple in your circumstances and you will see God transform your wilderness into the Promised Land in which you *can* and *will* experience and enjoy His blessings.