

Eternal Security and the Warning Passages of Hebrews

Dr. Kenneth M. Gardoski

Associate Professor of Systematic Theology
Baptist Bible Seminary
Clarks Summit, Pa.

The Concept of Eternal Security

Eternal Security (ES) means that the genuine believer's salvation is eternally secure. Many refer to ES as the perseverance of the saints, but a better designation might be *divine preservation*, because according to it "God faithfully and powerfully preserves genuine believers" in their salvation.¹

A primary text for ES is 1 Pet 1:5.² Four things are noteworthy. First, we are protected by *God's power* (ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ). Second, we are *continually* protected (φρουρουμένων). Third, God protects us *through* our faith (διὰ πίστεως). Fourth, we are protected by God *for* salvation (εἰς σωτηρίαν). Wayne Grudem concludes:

This last phrase makes it difficult if not impossible to see any end to God's guarding activity. If God's guarding has as its purpose the preservation of believers until they receive their full, heavenly salvation, then it is safe to conclude that God will accomplish that purpose and they will in fact attain that final salvation. Ultimately their attainment of final salvation depends on God's power.³

The Warning Passages of Hebrews

The warnings of Hebrews are part of a larger set of NT warning passages, which are secondary texts in the discussion of ES.⁴ We must ask several questions of these passages. First, what is the spiritual state of the person under discussion? Is he or she without doubt a genuine believer from the context? Second, what loss is the person in danger of suffering? Is it without doubt spiritual salvation?

It helps to remember that Hebrews is a self-contained "word of exhortation" (Heb 13:22).⁵ The writer exhorts his readers generally to go on in Christian maturity, but he is particularly concerned about some of them who are in danger of falling away (3:12; 4:1,

¹ Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1997), 450.

² Passages that qualify as primary in the discussion of ES are those which directly address the permanence of the believer's salvation. Such passages must deal clearly with three things:

(1) genuine believers; (2) spiritual salvation; and (3) the permanency of that salvation. Several other primary passages for ES are John 10:27–30, Rom 8:28–30, Eph 1:13–14, and 1 John 3:9.

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: IVP; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 792.

⁴ NT warning passages should be secondary, not primary, in the discussion of ES because they do not deal with the elements of footnote 2 with sufficient clarity.

⁵ Andrew H. Trotter calls Hebrews "a sermon with an epistolary twist" (*Interpreting the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997], 19).

11; 6:4–6; 10:29). The writer appears to warn the same group of the same danger in each of the warning passages. Thus, all of the warning passages in Hebrews should contribute to a synthesized understanding of the author’s warning to his readers.⁶

Hebrews 3:7–4:13

There are five warnings in Hebrews, but we will focus on three.⁷ In Heb 3:7–4:13 two warnings stand out (3:12; 4:11). However, 3:6 and 14 provide an interpretive key: we are God’s household if we hold fast firm until the end (3:6); we have become partakers of Christ if we hold fast firm until the end (v. 14). In other words, perseverance is the evidence that one has truly partaken of Christ and is a genuine member of God’s house.⁸ The wilderness generation is the writer’s example *par excellence* of faithlessness (3:19; 4:2). His warning is to professing believers, who must be sure they have exercised genuine faith lest they fall away in unbelief and fail to enter God’s salvation rest (3:12; 4:11). Those who have believed enter that rest (4:3), and by perseverance give evidence of their genuine faith (3:6, 14).

This is the Test of Genuineness View: professing believers who repudiate Christ show they never exercised genuine faith to begin with. Other proponents of ES take the Loss of Reward View (genuine believers who do not remain faithful lose present and/or future rewards).⁹ I reject it for two reasons: (1) initial saving faith and not subsequent faithfulness seems to be in view (cf. 3:6, 14, 19; 4:2–3, 10–11); (2) heaven and not rewards will be missed by falling away (4:3, 10–11).

Hebrews 6:4–8

This is the most discussed warning passage in Hebrews and perhaps all of Scripture. The warning is that those who have had the experiences of vv. 4–5 and yet fall away will suffer the judgment of v. 8. However, in v. 9 the writer hopes for “better things” from his readers, “things that accompany salvation.” Furthermore, the subject of vv. 4–5 falls away, which genuine believers do not do (3:6, 14). Perseverance is the fruit of genuine faith (6:10–12); the failure to persevere, even if preceded by wonderful experiences (cf. 3:9, 16; 4:2), is evidence of the lack of genuine conversion.

⁶ Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *TrinJ* 13NS (1992): 23, note 4.

⁷ The five are: Heb 2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 6:4–8; 10:26–31; 12:1–29.

⁸ Buist M. Fanning calls this the “interpretive paradigm” for understanding all the warnings in Hebrews (“A Theology of Hebrews,” in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck and Darrell L. Bock [Chicago: Moody, 1994], 410).

⁹ A popular book that takes this view for NT warnings generally, and the warnings of Hebrews specifically, is Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Significance of Man*, 2d ed. (Hayesville, N.C.: Schoettle Publishing, 1993). Another proponent of this view is Rodney J. Decker. See his three recent articles in our BBS journal: “The Warnings of Hebrews 3–4,” *JOMAT* 5, no. 1 (2001): 5–27; “The Warning of Hebrews Six,” *JOMAT* 5, no. 2 (2001): 26–49; and “The Exhortations of Hebrews 10:19–25,” *JOMAT* 6, no. 1 (2002): 44–62.

This again is the Test of Genuineness View. Other proponents of ES take one of four other views. Some take the Loss of Community View (corporate exclusion of covenant blessings apart from salvation). However, vv. 4–6 describe individual not community experiences. Some take the Hypothetical View (the falling away could never occur). However, this turns an actual warning into an artificial one. Some take the Loss of Reward View. However, I see three problems with this view: (1) it assumes the writer thinks all his readers are saved (but cf. 6:4–6, 9; vv. 7–8); (2) it fails to see v. 6 as apostasy; (3) it fails to see v. 8 as a picture of eternal death. Finally, some take the Means of Salvation View (warnings are the means God uses to keep believers saved).¹⁰ I reject it for four reasons: (1) it assumes all the readers are saved (but cf. 6:4–6, 9); (2) it depends on the participle “and have fallen away” (παραπεσόντας) in v. 6 being conditional, which it is not; (3) it is essentially the Hypothetical View; (4) nothing in the text shows that the writer intends his warning to be the means of salvation. Even if he does, how can it serve that end when the warning against loss is essentially a bluff?

Hebrews 10:26–31

While most people think of 6:4–8 when they discuss the warnings of Hebrews, 10:26–31 may be the most challenging for ES for four reasons: (1) the writer seems to include himself in the warning (v. 26); (2) the recipients of the warning seem to be saved (cf. vv. 26, 29, 30, 32); (3) their sin seems to be apostasy (vv. 26, 29); (4) their fate seems to be eternal judgment (vv. 26–27).

In response, however, I see several key points. First, from the previous context we see that the writer is concerned about “some” who are forsaking the assembly (v. 25). Second, while the writer says “we” in v. 26, his concern is for “some” who are forsaking the assembly (v. 24), “him” who would trample Christ, spurn His blood, and insult the Spirit of grace (v. 29), and “those” who would shrink back to destruction (v. 39). In contrast, the writer is convinced that he and his readership generally have faith unto salvation (v. 39). Third, while at first glance it appears that the recipients of the warning are genuine believers (cf. vv. 26, 29, 30, 32), they are not since they go on sinning willfully (v. 26) and shrink back to destruction, thereby proving their lack of genuine faith (v. 39).

But what about “sanctified” in v. 29? It is perfectly legitimate to translate “by which he was sanctified” (ἐν ᾧ ἡγιάσθη) as “by which one is sanctified.”¹¹ So instead of saying that the willful sinner of v. 26 is a sanctified believer who is ultimately lost, the verse is

¹⁰ Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday champion this view in their recent book *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2001).

¹¹ McKnight agrees this is possible, and if correct would “be no comment whatsoever about the status of the person who mistreats the blood of the covenant.” However, in the end McKnight rejects this interpretation (“Warning Passages,” 43, note 80). But not only is this interpretation possible, it also harmonizes nicely with 10:14, which teaches that by one offering Christ “has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.” Thus, 10:14 and 29 agree: the blood of Christ is what sanctifies believers perfectly.

claiming that this person willfully and decisively rejects the only means of sanctification available: the blood of Christ.

I am arguing again for the Test of Genuineness View: if a professing believer repudiates Christ he demonstrates his lack of faith and will suffer eternal ruin. Some take the Hypothetical View, but I reject it here for the same reason as before: there is no need for a warning if the danger is not real. Some take the Means of Salvation View, but I reject it for the same reasons as before: it assumes all the readers are genuine believers and fails to see the distinction the writer makes between himself and others who have faith unto salvation, and those who have no faith and shrink back to destruction (v. 39).

Furthermore, this view really is no different from the Hypothetical View. Some take the Loss of Reward View, but I reject it here for two reasons: (1) it fails to consider how the writer separates himself and his readers generally as those who have faith unto salvation from those without faith who shrink back to destruction (v. 39); and (2) it fails to recognize that the willful sinner will suffer the consuming fire (v. 27) of destruction (v. 39)—a fate worse than death (vv. 28–29)—and not mere loss of reward.

Conclusion

I do not treat the warning passages of Hebrews as primary in the discussion of ES because they lack sufficient clarity as to the spiritual state of the subjects and the danger they are facing. The difficulty of these passages is reflected in the very different interpretations of them, even by scholars in the same theological camp. Because they are so difficult to interpret, these warnings cannot be made to prove or disprove ET. They simply fail to answer clearly the question of whether a true believer can lose his or her salvation. On the other hand, there are texts like 1 Pet 1:5 which are sufficiently clear so as to answer that question. Such passages should be treated as primary.

Nevertheless, the warnings of Hebrews can be interpreted in line with ES. Proponents of ES take different approaches to them, but the one most satisfactory to me is the Test of Genuineness View. First, Heb 3:7–4:13 is foundational for understanding all the warnings. Israel in the wilderness is proof that people can experience many blessings (3:9, 16; 4:2) yet fail to enter God's rest because of unbelief (3:19; 4:2). The writer warns lest some of his readers fall away in the same manner (3:12; 4:1, 11). Only genuine believers enter God's rest of salvation (4:2), and the fruit of true faith is perseverance (3:6, 14).

Second, Heb 6:4–8 is not an isolated text but builds on the previous warning. In one sentence (vv. 4–6) the writer develops the same teaching already set forth in 3:7–4:13: it is possible for a professing believer to experience wonderful spiritual blessings along with the people of God (vv. 4–5), and yet fall away (v. 6) and suffer eternal judgment (v. 8). Such experiences, while good, do not give clear evidence of salvation (v. 9). Since perseverance is the fruit of true faith (3:6, 14), and those described in 6:4–6 fail to persevere, they have not exercised genuine faith.

Third, Heb 10:26–31 focuses on the penalty of apostasy. The professing Christian who repudiates Christ will not find forgiveness with God (v. 26), but will suffer eternal fiery punishment in hell (vv. 29–31). Such a person lacks genuine faith and shrinks back to destruction (v. 39). The writer exhorts his readers to press on to Christian maturity, and warns those among them who are on the verge of repudiating Christ altogether that they cannot abandon Christ, church, and faith without dire consequence.