

The Stern Warnings of Hebrews

SPEAKER Matt Ryniker

DATE Sunday, May 12, 2024

PASSAGES Hebrews 10; Hebrews 2; Hebrews 3; Hebrews 6; 1 John 3

MESSAGE Begins at 1:08:28 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Hebrews contains a line that has frightened sincere Christians for centuries: “if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.” Read against the rest of the letter and the rest of scripture, it is not a warning about God’s patience running out. It is a warning about the human heart hardening until it walks away from the only lifeboat there is.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ The warning passages in Hebrews are not about God abandoning people. They are about people abandoning God.
- ◆ Scripture everywhere assumes believers will sin and gives instructions for restoring them — confession, gentle rebuke, forgiveness seventy-seven times. A reading of Hebrews that makes those instructions pointless is the wrong reading.
- ◆ Measure any teaching by the gospel. Matt applies the same filter here that Paul applies to prophecy: what gospel is this built on?
- ◆ All four warnings in Hebrews say the same thing in different language — do not drift, do not harden, do not fall away, do not throw away your confidence.
- ◆ In Hebrews 6 the verb is active, not middle-passive. The point is not that a person cannot be restored; it is that there is nothing left for you to say to someone who knows it all and rejects it all.
- ◆ “Crucifying once again the Son of God” does not mean Jesus dies again. It means joining the ranks of those who spat at him.

- ◆ Fear that God will not take you back is itself evidence of a soft heart. The person Hebrews warns about is not afraid — he is done.

► 1:08:28

Hope Chapel is working through Hebrews, and Matt said plainly why he preaches through books: it forces him not to avoid the hard passages, which is easy to do when everything is a one-off. Last week's text carried a gentle rebuke about why we gather — not as legalistic routine, and not as the place we come to be filled up, but to pour ourselves out for one another. This week the rebuke is not gentle.

The verse everybody remembers

► 1:10:23

It could sound, Matt admitted, like the author is saying: it is wonderful that you are a Christian, but from your conversion forward, if you ever sin on purpose, God will hurl you away from his grace with disdain. That is how it feels on a first reading.

“What I’m going to try to show is that what the author of Hebrews is warning us against is not God’s careless and callous disdain, but our own. And when we engage in a careless, callous disdain of the only lifeboat there is, all that remains is death.”

1. Start with what the rest of scripture assumes

► 1:11:53

James writes to the sick among the brethren and says that if the one prayed for has committed sins, he will be forgiven — and then, *therefore*, confess your sins to one another (James 5:14–16). What is the point of confessing sins you cannot commit without being finished? Paul writes the same assumption into church life:

“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

GALATIANS 6:1–2 ↗

That gentleness reflects God's heart rather than contrasting with it — “just in case we ever think we're better than the Lord.” Jesus assumed the same, giving instructions for confronting a brother who sins ([Matthew 18:15–17](#)), and answering Peter's question about seven times with seventy-seven — a number meant to break the accounting rather than replace it ([Matthew 18:21–22](#)). In Corinth, the man disciplined in the first letter is restored in the second:

“For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.”

2 CORINTHIANS 2:6–8 ↗

2. Measure it by the gospel

► 1:16:24

Matt borrowed the rubric from the church's earlier work in 1 Corinthians on discerning prophecy. You weigh the words and you weigh the life, but the real test is: what gospel is this built on? An angel could show up curing headaches and making rain, and Paul's standard still holds — even if he himself came back preaching another gospel, do not believe him ([Galatians 1:8–9](#)). Run Hebrews 10 through that filter and the rejection in view is not God turning on people who fail. It is people whose desire to fail is so tenacious that they will spit at the cross and walk away from it even when walking away is hard.

3. Every warning in the letter says the same thing

► 1:18:07

The first warning is about drift: pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it — how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation ([Hebrews 2:1–4](#)). Nothing there converts grace back into performance. There is one gospel, it is reliable because the Lord it rests on is reliable, and the instruction is not to leave it.

► 1:19:25

The second is about hardness, drawing on Israel in the wilderness: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion” ([Hebrews 3:7–11](#)). Matt drew out the contrast the text itself makes. God is not the fickle party. “He's not hot and cold on you. He's so all in that Jesus already incarnated, became one of us, truly and profoundly, and died and rose again, and that will never be undone.” God wanted them in his rest; their hearts went astray.

“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

HEBREWS 3:12–14 ↗

Hold fast to your original confidence; do not fall away from the living God. Both halves are about the direction a person faces, not a tally of failures — which matters, because nearly everyone who names the name of Jesus has at some point lashed out from fear or hurt and known perfectly well it was a choice. You did not trip and fall into it. Matt has met two men who claimed they no longer sin, and noted he would have liked to ask their wives.

4. Hebrews 6 and the verb that changes the passage

► 1:23:26

“For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.”

HEBREWS 6:1–6 ↗

This is a person who knows everything there is to know — tasted it, seen the exhibits, read the book, went to the prayer meeting, had the tinglies — and then walks away because he does not want it. The Greek verb here is active, not middle-passive. Some English translations render it “they cannot be brought to repentance,” which makes the person sound like a hopeless case. The active voice puts the impossibility somewhere else: there is nothing left for *you* to say to him.

“Oh, well, you don’t want the regular gospel? Well, there’s this appendix and there’s this secret book and there’s extra special stuff that Jesus keeps just for such an occasion.” There is no break-glass edition. You can pray for him and you can remind him, but you cannot repent for him.

And Jesus will not be crucified twice — he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he is not coming back to die because someone leaves. To crucify him again is to take your place alongside the crowd that did it, hurling insults.

5. Then what does “go on sinning deliberately” mean?

► 1:26:32

“For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.”

HEBREWS 10:26–27 ↗

Given all of it — the passages on restoring the fallen, the gospel as filter, and three prior warnings saying drift, hardening and falling away — this phrase is the dynamic equivalent of walking away. It is not the sincere believer clinging to the cross and still failing through addiction, brokenness and immaturity. It is the person rejecting the sacrifice itself.

► 1:29:27

Can biblical language really be that absolute about someone who leaves entirely? John writes exactly that way:

“No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him... Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.”

1 JOHN 3:6–8 ↗

That letter is famously simplified — light and dark, no gray, as if speaking to children. Two camps, and John names both captains: the one in whom there is no sin, who appeared to take sin away, and the chief sinner. By this it is evident who are the children of God and who are the children of the devil. John is not unaware that Jesus told us to confront a sinning brother. He is painting impressionistically: there is a way of destruction and a narrow way toward Christ.

6. Two soldiers

► 1:32:02

Matt pressed John’s picture into an image worth keeping. Stand in the war camp of the Lord Most High, wearing his colors and his banner. You may stumble. You may fall. You may lash out, and be bitter enough that you keep lashing out for months. Your brothers in arms will tell you to cut it out. That is not what Hebrews is warning about.

“What Hebrews is warning you about is the kind of person who on purpose says, I don’t want to wear this color. I’m going to take this off. I’m going to wander away from this camp. I see the light over there, I see the dark over here — I want to go here. I took off the banner of the Lord Most High and I put on this one on purpose. I know what I’m doing. I’m doing it anyway.”

God has left us more ways back than we can count: brothers and sisters who rebuke gently and then less gently, the church itself, the conviction of the Holy Spirit, prophetic words that put a person on his face. “His goodness and his mercy are like attack dogs that will hound you.” He speaks in dreams. He burns the conscience.

7. If you are afraid, that is the answer

► 1:34:50

Matt reported the conversation he has had more than once. Someone says: I’m scared the Lord won’t take me back. So you want him? Yes. You want relationship with him? Absolutely. You would like to repent? Yes, I’m just worried it is too late. “This is easy. He wants it more than you do.” A heart that soft is one God is already speaking to. The other conversation sounds entirely different: yes, I know all about the gospel, and I hate it. Those are not the same person.

The Hebrews audience had already proved which camp they were in — publicly reproached, standing with prisoners, joyfully accepting the plundering of their property because they knew they had a better and abiding possession (Hebrews 10:32–34). They stayed, out of loyalty, which is the core issue.

Do not throw it away

► 1:37:40

“Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.”

HEBREWS 10:35–36 ↗

Matt’s conclusion was pastoral. God’s mercy is immense, even scandalous — and if you are worried you are one of his enemies, the response is to repent and draw near to the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16). The whole operation was never built on the confidence that sheep would sort themselves out and pick the right direction. That is why there is a shepherd, and why he carries a rod and a staff (Psalm 23:4). The goat is the one who hates the staff and will do anything to avoid it — and there is nothing a fellow sheep can offer him that he has not already refused.

You will need endurance; Matt called that an understatement. But every ounce of the pain and embarrassment and shame, carried while clinging to Christ, turns out in hindsight to be treasure — part of a crown you get to throw at his feet. “We may even wish we could have done more, but it’s worth it.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- James 5:14–16
- Galatians 6:1–2
- Matthew 18:15–17
- Matthew 18:21–22
- 2 Corinthians 2:6–8
- Galatians 1:8–9
- Hebrews 2:1–4
- Hebrews 3:7–11
- Hebrews 3:12–14
- Hebrews 6:1–6
- Hebrews 10:26–27
- 1 John 3:6–8
- Hebrews 10:32–34
- Hebrews 10:35–36
- Hebrews 4:16
- Psalm 23:4

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Which verse in Hebrews has frightened you, and what did you assume it meant before this message?
2. Matt says we should measure hard passages by the gospel. What does that look like in practice when you hit a text you cannot square with grace?
3. The difference between stumbling in the camp and walking out of it is direction, not severity. How would you know which one you were doing?
4. Matt listed the ways God calls people back — brothers and sisters, the church, the Spirit, prophetic words, dreams, conscience. Which of those has hounded you, and did you welcome it?
5. If fear of being unforgivable is itself a sign of a tender heart, what confidence do you need to stop throwing away this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lq5p9hWGdl&t=4108s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.