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## Hebrews 10:26-31: Apostasy and Can Believers Lose Salvation?

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## Hebrews 10:26-31: Apostasy and Can Believers Lose Salvation?

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## Introduction

The warning passage of Hebrews 10:26-31 is one of five warning passages throughout the book of Hebrews regarding apostasy. Hebrews 1:1-2:4; 3:7-12; 5:11-6:15; 10:26-31; and 12:25-27 are the five warning passages; the one being addressed in this paper is the fourth, and arguably the most serious and sobering. These warnings are some of the hardest passages to interpret in the New Testament and have been thoroughly investigated and debated throughout church history, and even today. The problem with these passages, and specifically the fourth, is that they have raised concerns regarding apostasy and whether salvation can be lost. This has created a relative division regarding the problem over time. Two main camps of theology have manifested that will be considered; those who believe salvation can be lost, such as Arminians, and those who believe salvation cannot be lost, such as Calvinists. There are plenty of other camps of theological thought, but these two are arguably the largest and most prominent and who will be considered in this paper.

The nature regarding apostates and their salvation will be briefly explored throughout this paper. Whether salvation can be lost will also be considered and if it applies to these verses. The exegetical issue in this epistle is the salvation status of the audience and the biblical definition of apostasy. Objectivity will be upheld as much as possible while following the outline Vyhmeister presents while keeping in mind that complete objectivity is not possible.<sup>1</sup>

This is an important issue, because it speaks on the nature of salvation for the believer and whether that salvation can be lost. Especially, regarding the statement, “if we continue to

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Jean Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain Robertson, *Quality Research Papers: For Students of Religion and Theology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014); Dean B. Deppe, *All Roads Lead to the Text: Eight Methods of Inquiry into the Bible: A Template for Model Exegesis with Exegetical Examples Employing Logos Bible Software* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011).

sin...” What exactly does this imply? “All fall short to the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23) and “... if we say we are without sin, we deceive ourselves” (1 John 1:8). How are these other verses explained in light of what this passage is warning its audience?

This paper will be specifically analyzing Hebrews 10:26-31 out of the five relatable warning passages in the book of Hebrews. Some may be mentioned briefly, but this research paper will focus primarily on the fourth warning. The topic of salvation is incredibly massive and spans the Bible in its entirety. Some passages will be considered in support for interpreting Hebrews 10:26-31; however, the short nature of this paper must be taken into consideration, and only a few selected passages will be included. This paper will also begin by exploring the context of the book of Hebrews, who its audience was, when and where it was composed, and the problems the audience was facing that warranted such an epistle. After which, the paper will begin exegeting the proper interpretation of the text being evaluated while also translating it from its original Greek language. After this, both the Arminian and the Calvinist positions will be briefly evaluated and considered with their interpretation to these verses. This will include the nature of apostasy and its relation to whether salvation can be lost, and finally what the application means for believers today. Ultimately, this paper will argue the Arminian interpretation of this passage is the most accurate and that the Calvinist interpretation is untenable as it relates to this warning regarding apostasy and losing salvation.

### **Historical Context**

The historical context is important for properly exegeting the original meaning of the text and how it is applicable today. Several areas of interest will be taken into consideration for this paper. The date, audience, environment, as well as the purpose for the epistle will be evaluated. The original language will also be taken into consideration, however, much more focus will be

given to the translation for this passage. As such, the translation of the passage will be given its own separate section.

### Date

The exact date of when Hebrews was composed is unknown, however, evidence suggests it was written sometime prior to 70 C.E., though it is possible to date the book anytime from 60-96 C.E.<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 2:1-3 seem to indicate that the readers have not walked with Christ Himself, but have only heard the message from those who did. ‘Timothy’ is also mentioned in 13:23. If Paul’s younger associate was ‘released’, indicating that it was in his lifetime, the book of Hebrews must have been written before he died. Finally, there are no references to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and with this book directed towards the Jewish Christians and them still following the sacrificial laws, it would have made sense to address this issue if it had occurred.

### Audience

Hebrews was most likely addressed to Hellenistic Jewish Christians.<sup>3</sup> The writer makes constant references to the Old Testament, seems to assume the readers knew about Jewish sacrificial rituals (Heb. 10:1-2), and warns the readers about reliance on rituals rather than Christ Himself. It seems the audience had been slipping back into the “old way” of their Judaism.<sup>4</sup> Guthrie agrees with the audience being Hellenistic Jewish Christians, however, holds that no true ethnic demographical composition can be determined because many Gentiles had been involved

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<sup>2</sup> “New Testament: Introductions and Outlines,” Bible.org, accessed April 18, 2021, <https://bible.org/series/new-testament-introductions-and-outlines>.

<sup>3</sup> George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary: from Biblical Text... to Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999); F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

within the synagogues at that time.<sup>5</sup> We can see however, John Calvin considers the recipients as a mixture of “true” Christians and not “wholehearted” Christians. He states, “It was necessary for him (author) to show what He (Christ) was for they did not yet clearly understand the end, the effect, and the advantages of His coming; but being taken up with a false view of the Law, they laid hold on the shadow instead of the substance.”<sup>6</sup>

### Purpose

The book of Hebrews is an epistle. This literary genre is important in understanding the text because it allows the reader to understand the nature of the book and why it was written.<sup>7</sup> It was written for a particular purpose for a specific set of people. Hebrews 10:26-31 is one of five warning passages within the epistle (2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:26-31; 12:1-29).

Interestingly, all these warning passages share a common form of four points: (1) the audience is in danger of committing an act or are committing said act, (2) the sin coming from the act, (3) the exhortation, (4) finally the consequences of that sin.<sup>8</sup> The preceding passage of Hebrews 10:26-31 in verses 19-25 set forth the immediate context of Hebrews 26-31. These verses put forth three representations of living accordingly: “let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith,” (22) “let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,” (23) and “let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds” (24).

### Translation

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentary on Hebrews: Enhanced Version, Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Scott Duvall and Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *Trinity Journal* 13, no. 1 (1992): 25-26.

To better understand the text the original language Hebrews was written in, Greek, must be understood.<sup>9</sup> This will illuminate any nuances and what the author was trying to communicate. Some important words to take into consideration from this passage are as follows: Adversaries, Covenant, Fury, Judgment, Knowledge, Law, Punishment, Sacrifice, Sin, Truth, Vengeance, and Willfully.<sup>10</sup>

### Greek

The Greek translation of Hebrews 10:26-31 says:

**26** Ἐκουσίως γὰρ ἀμαρτανόντων ἡμῶν μετὰ τὸ λαβεῖν τὴν ἐπίγνωσιν τῆς ἀληθείας, οὐκέτι περὶ ἀμαρτιῶν ἀπολείπεται θυσία,

**27** φοβερὰ δέ τις ἐκδοχὴ κρίσεως καὶ πυρὸς ζῆλος ἐσθίειν μέλλοντος τοὺς ὑπεναντίους.

**28** ἀθετήσας τις νόμον Μωϋσέως χωρὶς οἰκτιρμῶν ἐπὶ δυσὶν ἢ τρισὶν μάρτυσιν ἀποθνήσκει

**29** πόσῳ δοκεῖτε χείρονος ἀξιωθήσεται τιμωρίας ὁ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ καταπατήσας καὶ τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης κοινὸν ἠγησάμενος, ἐν ᾧ ἠγιάσθη, καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς χάριτος ἐνυβρίσας;

**30** οἶδαμεν γὰρ τὸν εἰπόντα,

**Ἔμοι ἐκδίκησις, ἐγὼ ἀνταποδώσω.**

καὶ πάλιν,

**Κρινεῖ κύριος τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ.**

**31** φοβερὸν τὸ ἐμπεσεῖν εἰς χεῖρας θεοῦ ζῶντος.<sup>11</sup>

### English

The English NIV translation of Hebrews 10:26-31 says:

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<sup>9</sup> James Moffatt, *The International Critical Commentary*, Edited by Alfred Plummer. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: Edinburgh, 1924).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Coogan, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, an Ecumenical Study Bible*, Edited by Marc Z. Brettler and Carol A. Newsom, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (United States: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> *The Greek-English New Testament: UBS 5th Revised Edition and NIV*, ed. Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 1476-1479.

**26** If we deliberately (intentionally; adverb) keep on sinning (persist in sin; verb, present active participle, plural, genitive) after we have received (acquired; verb, aorist, active, infinitive) the knowledge (accusative) of the truth (genitive), no sacrifice for sins (genitive, plural) is left (remain; present, verb, passive, indicative),

**27** but only a fearful expectation of judgment (judgment; genitive, singular) and of raging fire that will (is going to; verb, present, active, genitive) consume (verb, present, active, infinitive) the enemies of God.

**28** Anyone who rejected (verb, aorist, active) the law of Moses died (verb, present, active, indicative) without mercy (genitive, plural) on the testimony of two or three witnesses (dative, plural).

**29** How much more severely do you think someone deserves (verb, future, passive) to be punished who has trampled (treat with disdain; verb, aorist, active) the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of Grace?

**30** For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay (future, active, indicative),” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.”

**31** It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.<sup>12</sup>

### **Interpretation**

“If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left...” (Heb. 10:26). First, this does not necessarily pertain to sinning in ignorance or everyday weakness. Everyone sins and falls short to the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). This includes willful and intentional sinning of someone who has received the knowledge and realization of the divine and the Gospel.<sup>13</sup> This is habitual and continuous sin without remorse, conviction, or repentance (Heb. 6:4). This also does not necessarily mean without enticement, for “... the Devil prowls around seeking all to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8), regardless, it is still their voluntary decision (James 1:13-15).

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<sup>12</sup> *The Greek-English New Testament: UBS 5th Revised Edition and NIV*, ed. Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 1476-1479; *The New Strong's Concise Concordance & Vine's Concise Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> “Hebrews 10:26-27,” Precept Austin, accessed April 9, 2021, [https://www.preceptaustin.org/hebrews\\_1026-27](https://www.preceptaustin.org/hebrews_1026-27).



“... but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (Heb. 10:27). The author warns the audience that if anyone continues to deliberately sin without repentance, they will not receive Christ’s intercession with God. Only a fearful prospect of a “raging fire” reserved for God’s enemies awaits them (Isa. 26:11).

“Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses” (Heb. 10:28). The author references the law of Moses and reminds the audience the punishment of death by the testimony of at least two witnesses (Deut. 17:6).

“How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of Grace?” (Heb. 10:29). As the author consistently does throughout the Epistle, they give a comparison from the lesser to the greater. The lesser being the law of Moses and the greater being the Son of God, namely, Jesus. These verses list a three-fold type of offense. (1) Any who has trampled the son of God (Jesus) underfoot, which essentially means the rejection of Jesus. (2) Any who regard or treat the blood of Jesus as profaned or ordinary and therefore not sufficient as a sacrifice similar to animals (Matt. 26:28; Mk. 14:24; Lk. 22:20). (3) Finally, any who arrogantly insults or blasphemes the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:31; Mk. 3:29).<sup>14</sup>

“For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people” (Heb. 10:30). The author reminds the audience, who are intimately aware of the Old Testament, that God will keep his promise to judge the unrighteous (Deut. 32:35-36).

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<sup>14</sup> Richard C. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Pub, 1938).

“It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31). Finally, the author ends with a remark contemplating the sobering reality of God’s judgment. This is in reference to the previous verses the author quotes from the Old Testament where God judges the enemies of Israel. The author is making a statement to draw his audience’s attention to God’s prior judgment to the enemies of Israel and how that relates to what God will do to those who, treat unholy the blood of the covenant and insult the Spirit of Grace by apostasy (Heb. 10:29).

### Arminian

The general consensus for Arminians’ interpretation of this warning, along with the other four warning passages (Heb. 1:1-2:4; 3:7-12; 5:11-6:15; and 12:25-27), asserts this passage not only involves the sin of apostasy but also the reality of believers capable of losing salvation.<sup>15</sup> This would also fit the overarching narrative of the author’s intent for writing to this particular audience and coincide with the other warning passages mentioned above. It is also noteworthy to point out the specific Greek word for “knowledge” is “epignosis” (ἐπίγνωσις) which references a full and complete knowledge, juxtaposed with “gnosis” which essentially means superficial knowledge.<sup>16</sup> For Arminians this is strong evidence to support gaining saving knowledge and losing salvation afterwards.<sup>17</sup> Arminians also assert “no sacrifice for sins is left” creates a problem for “limited atonement,” where faith is repudiated allowing no longer a sacrifice for apostates.

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<sup>15</sup> “Perseverance of the Saints Part 6: Hebrews 10:26-30,” Arminian Perspectives, last modified March 27, 2008, <https://arminianperspectives.wordpress.com/2008/03/27/perseverance-of-the-saints-part-6-hebrews-1026-30/>.

<sup>16</sup> *The New Strong's Concise Concordance & Vine's Concise Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> “Perseverance of the Saints Part 6: Hebrews 10:26-30,” Arminian Perspectives, last modified March 27, 2008, <https://arminianperspectives.wordpress.com/2008/03/27/perseverance-of-the-saints-part-6-hebrews-1026-30/>.

Last important points to take into consideration are verses 27 and 29. Arminians assert this describes the apostate's destiny from turning from the faith, not their rewards being burned up.<sup>18</sup> Verse 29 states the (apostate) has “trampled the Son of God underfoot”, who has been sanctified by the blood of the covenant, and who has insulted or blasphemed the Holy Spirit. Arminians assert this verse clearly points to the loss of salvation. If these apostates have trampled the Son of God, they had to have received saving grace. Further, it states they were “sanctified” by the covenant. This implies receiving provision and application then later rejecting through apostasy.<sup>19</sup> Taking this into consideration, the Arminian position seems to be the most accurate.

### Calvinist

The general consensus for Calvinist's interpretation of this warning, along with the other four warning passages (Heb. 1:1-2:4; 3:7-12; 5:11-6:15; and 12:25-27), holds the same belief that this passage involves the sin of apostasy. Contrary to the Arminians belief, however, Calvinists believe these verses do not speak of losing salvation and interpret these passages quite differently. For instance, Calvinists interpret verse 26 as having received a superficial level of knowledge and not truly accepting the truth. Essentially, the “outward” proclamation of the truth but not true “inward” acceptance or belief.<sup>20</sup> This creates a problem, however, because as mentioned above, the Greek word does not involve “partial knowledge,” rather, it involves

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<sup>18</sup> “Hebrews 10:26-27,” Precept Austin, accessed April 9, 2021, [https://www.preceptaustin.org/hebrews\\_1026-27](https://www.preceptaustin.org/hebrews_1026-27).

<sup>19</sup> “Hebrews 10:26-27,” Precept Austin, accessed April 9, 2021, [https://www.preceptaustin.org/hebrews\\_1026-27](https://www.preceptaustin.org/hebrews_1026-27).

<sup>20</sup> John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentary on Hebrews: Enhanced Version, Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2009).

“complete knowledge.” Calvinists would also agree with Arminians this verse does not refer to sinning in ignorance or general weakness, rather, intentional sin with no remorse or conviction.

Some proponents of “unconditional security” would assert verse 27 has nothing to do with the destiny of the apostate and more to do with a loss of rewards in heaven. This claim is coupled with a parallel from Paul in 1 Corinthians. “If any man’s work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:14-15). Others would assert this passage deals with hell and God’s enemies; however, it is speaking in general of God’s enemies and not of believers.<sup>21</sup> This, too, is untenable because the entirety of this passage speaks nothing of rewards, rather, of God’s enemies and their judgment.

Finally, the last important point to briefly evaluate juxtaposed to the general Arminian interpretation is verse 29. James White claims the one who is sanctified by the “blood of the covenant” is Jesus, rather than the apostate.<sup>22</sup> This is in defense to a counter argument from Arminians regarding the problem with being sanctified by Christ then becoming an apostate. White states Christ, as the superior high Priest mentioned throughout Hebrews, is set apart by his own sacrifice (John 17:19; Heb 2:10; 5:7, 9; 9:11, 12).<sup>23</sup> Calvinists would conclude by stating these verses do in fact speak on apostasy, however, those who apostate was never truly saved, and these warning passages do not teach believers’ can lose their salvation.

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<sup>21</sup> “The Biblical Evidence for Hell,” Ligonier Ministries, last modified February 1, 2014, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/biblical-evidence-hell/>.

<sup>22</sup> James R. White, *The Potter's Freedom: A Defense of the Reformation and a Rebuttal to Norman Geisler's Chosen but Free* (Greenville, SC: Calvary Press, 2000), 244-245.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*; John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, reprint ed. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 6:530, 531.

The Calvinist position regarding these verses appears to be the least accurate and even unfalsifiable. Regarding White's position, the more natural reading of the text places the apostate throughout verse 29 in its entirety. White must reference to the apostate in the first part of the verse, "who has trampled the Son of God underfoot," then insert Jesus into the verse, "who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them," then once again reference back to the apostate, "and who has insulted the Spirit of Grace?" in order to correct the issue Arminians raise. Verse 29 most naturally refers to an apostate who has been saved by the blood of the covenant yet later insults the Holy Spirit by committing apostasy.

### **Application**

Regardless of whether a believer can lose their salvation, one thing is abundantly clear, Christians should not continue in sin. This is without a doubt taught throughout all of Scripture, not just the book of Hebrews. Taking the original context into consideration for applicability; this epistle was written to Jewish Christians who were in danger of apostasy. These Jewish Christians were trading what Christ had done as the perfect high Priest and were going back to their old Jewish laws and sacrificial systems. This warning is also seen in Hebrews 6:4-8 and is meant to warn the audience of the fatality involved with apostasy and to return their gaze to Christ.<sup>24</sup>

Christians today may not necessarily be in danger of returning to old Jewish laws or sacrificial systems, however, many are in danger of apostasy through other avenues. This can especially include the more radical side of Progressive Christianity, the pluralistic modern

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<sup>24</sup> Ralph Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Edited by David Hubbard, and Glenn Barker, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1991).

culture, the hypersexualization of modern society, the many effects of Postmodernism, and finally the prevalence of Critical Theory.

What is undeniable and virtually universally accepted is that not everyone who claims to be a Christian is actually a Christ-follower (Matt. 7:21-23). Genuine faith may actually be spurious (Matt. 13:1-23). Multiple New Testament authors warn their audiences to be wary of apostasy, living according to the flesh, and intentionally without conviction pursuing sin (John 15:1-8; Rom. 1:18-32, 8:13, 11:20-22; 1 Cor. 9:27, 15:1-2; Col. 1:21-23; 2 Tim. 2:17-19). John also speaks how those who were once with him, left, and therefore were never one of them (1 John 2:19).

God also assures his people he will never leave them, he is always faithful, and believers have security in him (John 6:39, 10:27-30; Rom. 5:9-10, 8:1-4; 1 Cor. 1:4, 8-9; Eph. 1:13-14; 1 Thess. 5:23-24). With these assurances, believers should persevere in the faith, complete their “race,” while producing good works (John 8:31, 10:27; 1 Cor. 9:24-25; Eph. 2:10; Col. 1:22-23; Heb. 3:13-14; 1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 4:7; 1 John 4:15).

Regardless of whether a believer can lose their salvation, the Bible makes it abundantly clear that believers should persevere in their faith, follow sound doctrine, pursue good works, flee, and resist the temptations of this world, the passions of the flesh, and the influence of Satan and his angels. All of this can be summed up in the greatest commandment Jesus illuminated to his followers and the questioning Pharisees, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matt. 22:37-38; Luke 10:27). If Christians obey this commandment, they will not have to worry about apostasy or losing their salvation.

## Conclusion

Hebrews 10:26-31 is one of the five primary warnings in the book of Hebrews regarding apostasy and contains some of the most illustrating and direst messages of its consequences. Arminians interpretation of these verses appear to be the most accurate juxtaposed to the Calvinist position. This means it is possible for believers to lose salvation through apostasy when taking Hebrews 10:26-31 into consideration. It must be understood that apostasy is not necessarily “going prodigal” or “falling away” for a short while due to temptations and trials of this world and of the flesh. For all sin and fall short to the glory of God (Rom. 3:23-24). Apostasy is best understood as deliberate or intentional abandonment of the faith and can even include hatred or contempt without remorse or conviction. McKnight goes as far to say, “The evidence suggests that those who have committed this sin are not, in fact, worried about it or fearful of having committed it. The evidence suggests, on the contrary, that they are proud of it; they are boastful of their defiance of God’s will.”<sup>25</sup> The author of Hebrews exhorts the audience to persevere and endure as shown in Hebrews 10:22-25. As Paul boldly proclaims for himself and calls believers to pursue, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith (2 Tim. 4:7).

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<sup>25</sup> Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *Trinity Journal* 13, no. 1 (1992): 25-26.

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