

God's Power: Our Shield Against Apostasy

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The two previous articles demonstrated that God is the Source of all power. He not only creates and rules, but He is also the Source of everyone else's power too. Within His purpose, He calls us, grants us repentance, forgives us, justifies us, endows us with His Spirit of power, sanctifies us, gives us gifts, and then sends us on our way. In other words, His gifts enable and prepare us—empower us—to be saved.

This appears to be such a neatly tied package; everything is in place for a steady, uneventful pilgrimage to the Kingdom of God. Knowing this leads people to adopt such false notions as the doctrine of eternal security, commonly called "once saved, always saved." If this doctrine is true, why does God's Word warn the Christian so often not to turn aside as so many did after Israel's release from bondage to Egypt?

The warnings actually begin in the first chapters of the Book, when God clearly informs Adam and Eve that the wages of sin is death (Genesis 2:17; see Romans 6:23). They sin and are summarily escorted out of the Garden of Eden. God then places cherubim and a flaming sword to patrol its borders, guarding the way back to the Tree of Life. The conclusion is obvious: As sinners, they are no longer welcome to have a relationship with God. Throughout the Old Testament, the warnings continue with God's almost constant displeasure over Israel's conduct.

In the New Testament, Jesus warns us to make sure we count the cost, admonishing us that anyone who puts his hand to the plow and then looks back with longing is not fit for the Kingdom of God (Luke 14:25-33; 9:57-62). Likewise, the apostles frequently appeal to Christians to get with it, adding a sense of urgency because time is running short.

People can and do fall away. In the church experience of most of us are memories of family and friends who were part of the Worldwide Church of God. We witnessed its rapid growth in membership, as people made professions of faith, fellowshipped with it for many years, and in some cases, held positions of high responsibility. Yet, many of these have since left for other spiritual pastures, even returning to Protestant ones they had previously departed from. Others have dropped completely from sight.

How Does One Fall Away?

The record of Israel's trek through the wilderness presents a sobering witness of the kinds of trials that threaten the Christian's walk. In doing so, the Bible provides us with an unambiguous pattern of how people fall away, even to the point of showing us that—despite God's awesome power that we are encouraged to draw upon, despite His almost inexhaustible patience and mercy, and despite His sincere and urgent desire for all of us to enter His Kingdom—there is a point of no return if one persists in living a life of sin.

The Bible contains vivid illustrations that warn about how apostasy happens. Luke 9:62 provides us with insight into what is often the first step: "But Jesus said to him, 'No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.'" This "looking back" is not merely

reflecting to evaluate the progress made since one decided to leave the world. Instead, it is like Lot's wife, who looked back with a degree of longing to return to what she had left. Her life was literally on the line, and rather than being fully engaged in surviving, she placed a higher priority on life's lesser matters than on the greater one of preserving her life through God's gift of protection.

She looked back, revealing her heart still to be in Sodom, a type of the world. Her action indicates regret for having left. Success in God's way requires following an awesome vision of future glory with devoted conviction. Abraham is a primary example: He looked for a city built by God, apparently leaving his homeland without ever looking back (Hebrews 11:8-10, 13-16).

Once we commit to Christianity, God's calling becomes our vocation, which requires our concentrated attention going forward. A vocation is a person's regular occupation. What happens when a Christian looks back with a measure of longing is similar to someone talking on a cell phone while driving his car. He frequently drifts all over the road, swerving this way and that because, at best, his attention is split between conflicting priorities. He is setting himself up for trouble, and all too frequently, an accident occurs. A Christian cannot make a beeline for the Kingdom with his attention diverted elsewhere. We are not to be anything but *altogether* followers of the Son of God. The stakes are that high, for the fulfillment of His promise is so great.

Dramatic, sudden death, as happened to Lot's wife, will not likely happen to us if we gaze yearningly behind us. For this reason, a person who has begun to fall away will most likely take the second step backwards with hardly a pause. Hebrews 10:39 says, "But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul." Almost invariably, longing for the old life is followed by gradually and increasingly believing that God's requirements are too exacting and difficult.

In Jesus' parable in Luke 19:11-27, did not the man given one mina complain something similar to this when asked what he had gained with it? "Master, here is your mina, which I have kept put away in a handkerchief. For I feared you, because you are an austere man. You collect what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow" (verses 20-21).

We must be prepared to put God first in all things. There will be times when this will be exceedingly difficult, especially if the surrender of a thing involves the sacrifice of someone or something deeply loved or desired. It can happen, but such occasions are quite rare.

It has been said that he who is unwilling to sacrifice everything for the cause of God is really willing to sacrifice nothing. Drawing back happens despite God's promise that every trial is measured to the exact specifications needed by the individual Christian. In I Corinthians 10:13, God promises to provide relief from every problem: "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it." The word-picture in Hebrews 10:39 portrays a person shrinking back from following through on the demands of faith. He is looking for an easy way out of some distasteful thing he does not wish to face. This eventually happens to us all.

A major appeal of the world's way is that it seems to be broader and easier. As Jesus says in Matthew 7:13, the easier, broader way it probably is—for a while. That deceptively effortless way draws the person ever-further from salvation, and he grows steadily weaker as he loses contact with God. The one who apostatizes thus permits himself to be drawn back.

The third step is taken when a person actually turns away. John 6:65-66 records such an occasion in Jesus' ministry: "And He said, 'Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father.' From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more." In this poignant scene, Jesus watched people who may have been friends leave His entourage because they could not comprehend His teaching. He undoubtedly had spoken of things of an order far higher than they were accustomed to hearing, but rather than patiently facing it, as the apostles did, they simply gave up, proving themselves unfit for the Kingdom of God. Their loyalty could not stand the strain of what may have been merely a temporary misunderstanding. They had been followers, but apparently, they were seeking for something else.

By this stage, it is still not too late for a person to grab hold of himself and move forward, but the world's appeal has become almost overpowering. Spiritual decline has reached the tipping point, and he is in serious peril.

The fourth and final step backward is illustrated by Isaiah in the Old Testament: "But the word of the Lord was to them, 'Precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little.' That they might go and fall backward, and be broken and snared and caught" (Isaiah 28:13).

In examining the context carefully, we see that the people being described have reached the critical point where God's Word is falling on deaf ears. It is to them just jumbled noise. In New Testament terms, they had backslid beyond the reach of repentance and forgiveness. Here, the apostate reaches the point of no return; he has earned the Lake of Fire.

The Vital Instruction of Hebrews

Most of us have a verse, chapter, or even an entire book of the Bible that resonates with particular strength to us. It inspires us or provides us with a higher degree of understanding than other parts of the Bible. Herbert Armstrong told audiences on several occasions that his favorite chapter in the entire Bible was Ephesians 1. That chapter is indeed a tremendously humbling, meaningful, and inspiring arrangement of concepts that provides answers to a number of "why" or "how" questions.

For me, it is the entire book of Hebrews. For some reason, it draws me back to its pages time and again, motivating and uplifting me. I am not alone in this, as many authors of commentaries declare that it ranks on the very highest level. A few even go so far as to say that, if taken only on its literary merits, it is among the five greatest writings in the entire history of mankind!

I am not fit to judge such things, but I do appreciate its instruction on what God has called us to. It assesses in the grandest, most vivid way the value and importance of what God has given us, clarifying in broad, powerful strokes what we must do about it.

Hebrews' theme is actually quite simple. It presents the superiority of Jesus Christ and the message He brought to mankind—the gospel of the Kingdom of God containing the New Covenant—to anything, any message, any person, any way of life. However, it reflects most directly on what the Old Testament records regarding Israel and the covenant its people made with God at Mount Sinai. It focuses on the Old Covenant because it was itself superior to what any other nation had until the New Covenant was first offered to those whom God is calling. No other message, then, can even begin to compare.

The outline is simple too. The first two chapters are mostly introductory, but even here the language is soaring and majestic in what it proposes. It sets the stage by showing Christ as God's Son, seated at the right hand of the Father, superior to angels and Old Testament prophets. Through Him God has spoken.

Chapter 2 briefly considers what man is now compared to and what he will become through Jesus Christ. Chapter 3 introduces Christ's mission as an apostle to the church, superior even to the great Moses. Toward the end of the chapter, Paul urges us to remember, by way of contrast, the unfaithfulness of Israel under Moses. In chapter 4, he presents Christ as superior to Joshua, who brought Israel into the Promised Land, for despite Joshua's personal greatness as a leader, Israel failed to attain to the rest of God.

Chapter 5 begins the single largest block of chapters devoted to one subject in the epistle, showing why the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ is superior to the Aaronic and Levitical administration. This subject is of such importance that it occupies almost six chapters, finally ending in Hebrews 10:18. From that point to the end is the book's second longest section, containing exhortations to practical application of the teaching.

Hebrews arguably contains the most powerful exhortations in the entire Bible. Why? Because so much is on the line, a Christian can lose it all if he is unwilling to pay the price! The epistle exhorts through careful reasoning and using vivid illustrations and examples. It also contains dire warnings but shows that help is available too. It is devoted to the practical application of this tremendously compact bundle of historical comparisons, pointed doctrinal instruction, and inspiration.

The book's time setting appears to be AD 62-66, just half a decade or so from the Roman invasion of Jerusalem under Titus and the destruction of the Temple. This invasion virtually brought to an end the Jewish nation and way of life in Palestine. The historical material, drawn from Israel's past, plus the long focus on the Aaronic priesthood and Levitical ritual informs us that the epistle is addressed to Jews familiar with their nation's history, theological establishment, and workings.

The form of writing is doctrinal, frequently interspersed with brief and stirring exhortations. This form of writing was prompted by the fact that these particular Hebrews had drifted into a lackadaisical way of life, having grown weary of resisting the constant pressures from the degenerate world around them. Their faith and perseverance were breaking down, and their general attitude and character were deteriorating right along with their loss of faith (Hebrews 10:36—11:1).

This neglectful deterioration is my concern. It is easy just to drift along with the ever-present pressures of this world. These pressures will neither lessen nor go away. Like the Hebrews of Paul's day, we have the responsibility to choose, in an "end of the age" circumstance, which way we will go. God's solution to this sort of deterioration is found in the book of Hebrews, but understanding it requires focused attention.

It is organized in the manner of Paul's other epistles. The first part lays a doctrinal foundation, usually drawn from the Old Testament. The last part contains practical applications of those doctrines. Hebrews compares favorably with Romans and Ephesians in this format: Romans 1—11 are doctrinal, while chapters 12—16 contain practical applications; Ephesians 1—3 are doctrinal, while chapters 4—6 contain practical applications.

We lack the familiarity with and reverential feeling for the Temple and Tabernacle that the Israelites had. Nonetheless, we have an advantage over them, but only if we use it. We can understand to a far greater degree the spiritual truths contained within what was for them only the faint shadows of symbolism. Paul writes in Hebrews 9:1-5:

Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary. For a tabernacle was prepared; the first part, in which was the lampstand, the table, and the showbread, which is called the sanctuary; and behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All, which had the golden censer and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which were the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.

Add to this Hebrews 10:1: "For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect."

In some ways, the Temple and the Tabernacle both resembled a house, but a very special house, since it was held to be God's House and the very highest place of worship. They each contained two rooms separated by a heavy veil or drape, and these rooms contained furniture important to Israel's proper understanding, and therefore, to proper worship. Every aspect of these two buildings fits a pattern, a model, established for our understanding and proper worship of God under the *New Covenant*.

On each day, the officiating priests were required to perform their duties on its exterior and in the first room, but only the High Priest was permitted into the second room, called the Holy of Holies. Even so, the High Priest could enter that second room only one time each year, on the Day of Atonement. The Holy of Holies symbolized God's personal throne room and the place from which He judges mankind. For the purposes of this article, the drape separating the two rooms and the Holy of Holies itself are important.

In chapter 10, Paul signals he is coming to a transition because he states a significant doctrinal reality regarding a Christian's spiritual standing, which he had briefly mentioned only once early in the book. In fact, he mentions this reality twice within six verses and three times in chapter 10 alone. In Hebrews 10:10, 14, and 29, he reminds us that we are sanctified. He reinforces this by reminding us in verse 16 that the purpose for which God has sanctified us is so that He can write His laws in our hearts.

This statement opens eight more truths regarding sanctification. They are not listed here but are revealed in others of Paul's writings:

1. Sanctification requires cooperation with God.
2. Sanctification is the process during which we are living sacrifices.
3. Through sanctification, the legal righteousness of Christ, given through justification, becomes practical righteousness in daily life.

4. Through sanctification, Christian works come to the fore, and we glorify God by our lives.
5. The process of sanctification is necessary so that we are truly conformed to the image of Christ.
6. Through the process of sanctification, we witness for God.
7. Through the process of sanctification, we fulfill our role in the church.
8. Through the process of sanctification, we truly become holy, both legally and experientially.

As Paul is reaching the conclusion of this epistle, he reminds us of how important holiness is: "Pursue peace with all men, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). Once he gives this vital reminder about our sanctified status in chapter 10, he makes his transition to the next section. In this section, the patterns of the Temple and Tabernacle become important to our spiritual understanding and practical holiness.

Exhortations to Encourage Endurance

Hebrews 10:19 begins the verbal bridge that transitions from the doctrinal material to its practical application. This latter section contains arguably the most powerful exhortations in the entire Bible for us to get up and get going. If these Hebrews were not Laodicean as a whole, they were very close to it.

Overall, God is saying through the apostle, "Don't you realize your danger? Being justified and sanctified, you absolutely cannot allow yourselves to continue in your neglectful ways. You have powerful help available through Christ, yet you are drifting away! Don't you realize what you are giving up by your slow but steady drift into apostasy?" He had already warned them as chapter 2 opened that their neglect of their privileges and responsibilities was allowing this great salvation to slip away.

In Hebrews 10:19, He reminds them that they already have access to God, so they should come before Him with an eager boldness. This is one of our great privileges. Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden and God's presence, but through Christ, God's regenerated children are now invited into His presence in spirit. Because the way has been prepared for us to do this, we are able to come to know God up close and personal. This is among the greatest of all blessings afforded to everyone who makes the New Covenant.

In other words, He meets with us, not outside the back or front door, but inside the house! And not merely inside the house but inside the second room beyond the veil—the Holy of Holies—where formerly only the High Priest was welcome once a year! The veil separating the rooms in the Temple was torn asunder at Christ's death (Matthew 27:51). Nothing hinders our liberty to go boldly into God's very throne room.

Jesus Christ Himself is "the Way" to the Father (John 14:6). As High Priest, Jesus has dedicated Himself to intercede on behalf of us sinners in our relations with God. In John 17:19, in His prayer the night before His crucifixion, He says, ". . . for their [His disciples'] sakes, I sanctify Myself." He set Himself apart to the shedding of His blood for us and to His position as our High Priest.

The phrase in Hebrews 10:20, "through the veil, that is, His flesh," refers to what He did as a human to make this access to God possible. When He was flesh and blood, He died for us so that we, like Him, could go directly into the Holy of Holies. Spiritually, His death pierced the veil.

Thus, the first thing Paul lays out in this transition is a three-step trigger to prime the Hebrew Christians' latent memories so they will be armed with foundational incentives to rouse themselves spiritually and start moving forward. In verses 22-24, he makes three exhortations.

First, "let us draw near." In other words, get moving! He says, "Take advantage of this privilege of coming before God, and believe without doubting, knowing your sins are forgiven and remembering that God is faithful and merciful to forgive." Recall that in the performance of their duties, the priests had to wash their hands and feet before entering the holy place. This is why Paul mentions water. He is alluding to the Hebrews' need to become clean. He urges them to repent of their lackadaisical attitudes and to meet with their Maker in prayer.

Second, he commands them to "hold fast your profession." Paul uses a similar phrase five times before this. Apparently, lackadaisical drifting was a particularly common problem for them. He wants them to show by their conduct that they believe in what God has promised in the resurrection from the dead. In short, he advises, "Remember your conviction in the awesome hope of our calling." These people were allowing the world to get them down; they were succumbing to a "what's the use" resignation. They were not busy confirming their souls. Paul exhorts them to continue, to persevere in the grace God had already shown them, not wanting them to waste it by failing to look ahead and be persistent. He presses them to yield to God and to allow themselves to be reassured that He is faithful to His promises.

Pay special attention to the third exhortation in verse 24. The word "consider" is very emphatic. He urges them to think upon and to strive for unity by giving conscientious care to each other. He wants the Hebrews to give special attention to their brethren's circumstances, trials, temptations, weaknesses, and needs. They need to "fire each other up" to promote love for God and for each other and to carry out our common responsibilities. Christians do this by setting a good example, by occasional suitable exhortations, by acts of kindness, and by expressions of appreciation.

Notice that as this exhortation begins, Paul calls upon the "big three" Christian virtues: faith, hope, and love. These would form the foundation of what the Hebrews must do if they were to reverse their slide toward the Lake of Fire. These virtues must be implemented because they affect the quality of a person's relationship with God. Because a Christian has God's Spirit, these virtues are already part of him. However, each individual must himself choose to use them to turn his life around; no one can do this for another. Of course, it is understood that God is always there to help a person do this.

A Jarring Warning

We have now reached one of the most solemn and fear-provoking sections of Scripture. We need to understand that this passage is written to Christians, not to the world, and what it threatens is facing

any Christian who does not choose to believe that God is serious. God is *thundering* at His own children because some of them have become insipidly blasé about what He has done for them and have ignored the help that He makes so readily available to them.

This does not mean that everybody who heard this message was in that perilous spiritual condition. It was given, however, against the backdrop of some having already departed from the church, and it uses them as examples of what not to do, for the purpose of warning the others about what those who left are facing. To determine just where he stands, each person has to examine himself in light of Paul's instruction.

Yet, some who heard this message had regressed so far that they were on track to *apostatize*, which means "to depart from the faith." This subject is Paul's major motivation for writing the letter. He first introduces it as early as Hebrews 3:12: "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God." "Departing" is the Greek word *aphistemi*, meaning "to remove" or "to instigate to revolt."

How far had people departed? Hebrews 10:25 gives a clear indication by Paul's use of the word "forsaking" regarding assembling on the Sabbath. The Greek word means exactly this: Some of the Hebrews were not missing just an occasional Sabbath service but had abandoned attending Sabbath services entirely for extended periods, if not altogether. This accounts for the strength of the apostle's message.

A similar passage in II Peter 2:20-22 reads:

For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: "A dog returns to his own vomit," and, "a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire."

Peter speaks of apostasy here. He says it would have been better had they never known the way of righteousness rather than know it and then turn from it. Jesus said of Judas that it would have been better for him not to have been born (Matthew 26:24). The same end faced those who had forsaken assembling together on the Sabbath.

I Timothy 1:19 contains a vivid illustration of apostasy, saying that an apostate makes shipwreck of his faith in God. Having escaped the world, he returns to it and soon finds himself on the rocks, being beaten to death by the waves of life. As mentioned earlier, a person does not apostatize in one giant leap. Just as the Israelites obtained the Promised Land step by step, so apostasy occurs step by step. One goes forward, the other backward. If the backslider takes appropriate action, he does not have to lose his faith.

The first thing to note in Hebrews 10:26-27 is the word "sin." Paul is not speaking of sin in general but the specific sin of apostasy from the faith they once knew and professed. The apostasy he has in mind is not so much an act but a state brought on by many individual attitudes and sins, reproducing the original, carnal antagonism a person has toward God before conversion.

Some commentaries insist that the Authorized Version is not quite correct in translating the term in verse 26 as "willfully." These argue that the Greek word, *hekousios*, will not permit this translation. It appears only one other time, in I Peter 5:2, where it is translated as "willingly." The commentators insist that it should be rendered "willingly" in Hebrews 10:26.

The American Heritage College Dictionary supports their conclusion. To do something *willfully* is to do it purposely or deliberately. The commentators say all sin is done purposely because human nature is set up to do so, even though weakness, ignorance, or deception may be involved as well. To do a thing *willingly* is to be disposed, inclined, or prepared to do it. Its synonyms are "readily," "eagerly," "compliantly," "ungrudgingly," "voluntarily," and "volitionally." This sense is contained in the context because, by the time a person reaches the apostate stage in his backward slide, where he has forsaken God and His way, he has *no* resistance to sin.

The sinner is deliberately, even eagerly, determined to abandon Christ, to turn away from God and His way, having completely become an enemy once again. He sins with barely a second thought, if with any thought at all. He sins automatically, as there is none of God's Spirit left to constrain him. His conscience is totally defiled; he has forsaken God.

Awake to Salvation!

Who is in danger of committing this sin? All who have made a profession of faith in Christ but are now neglecting their salvation.

The message of Hebrews is that it does not have to be this way. If the person takes heed and stirs himself awake, if he truly seeks to overcome and grow once again, if he returns to being a living sacrifice and seeking to glorify God, if he truly denies himself and takes up his cross, if he keeps God's commandments to live life as a Christian, he will *not* apostatize.

He may fall back from time to time, but as long as he repents and honestly seeks God when sin occurs in his life, the sin is readily forgiven. I John 1:9 confidently proclaims, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." John 14:23 assures us that as long as we are keeping His Word, we are safe.

Hebrews 12:5-10 explains that God is faithfully working in our behalf, even chastening us if He sees fit, to get us turned around and headed again in the right direction and attitude. He does this faithfully because He does not want to lose us. Christ died for each child of God, thus each child He loves—and He loves them all—represents a substantial investment. Christ did not die in vain for anybody. In Hebrews 13:5, He charges us with the task of putting to work His promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

II Peter 2:4-9 provides us with a stern and yet encouraging exhortation:

For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly; and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly; and delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his

righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds)—then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment.

Peter is urging us to keep on keeping on! Those who apostatize are those who look back, who are drawn back, who turn back and fall back. Apostasy is simply the renunciation of the truths of the gospel, its promises, and its duties after one has been convicted by its truth and made a profession of it. But power belongs to God. It is His expressed will to use it to prepare us for His Kingdom. Do not let salvation slip away through neglectful non-cooperation.