

THE WHOLE BIBLE: Hebrews and James

INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS

- author is unknown – probably not Paul

Hebrews 2:3-4

³ How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, ⁴ while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Theme of Hebrews: “don’t fall away, Jesus is better”

- recipients were under intense persecution | temptation to give up

Hebrews 10:32-34

³² But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, ³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. ³⁴ For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

The problem of apostasy

- Christians can fall away from Christ

Hebrews 3:7 - 4:13

^{3:7} Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,

“Today, if you hear his voice,
⁸ do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
on the day of testing in the wilderness,
⁹ where your fathers put me to the test
and saw my works for forty years.
¹⁰ Therefore I was provoked with that generation,
and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart;
they have not known my ways.’
¹¹ As I swore in my wrath,
‘They shall not enter my rest.’”

¹² Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. ¹⁵ As it is said,

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

¹⁶ For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? ¹⁷ And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹ So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

^{4:1} Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. ² For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. ³ For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said,

“As I swore in my wrath,
‘They shall not enter my rest,’”

although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. ⁴ For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” ⁵ And again in this passage he said,

“They shall not enter my rest.”

⁶ Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷ again he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted,

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”

⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. ¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

JAMES

- author is James, brother of Jesus, leader of church in Jerusalem
- letter is focused on Christian living – faith lived out in good works

Most striking and controversial passage is James 2

- v. 24 – “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone”
- is this a contradiction to Paul?

Galatians 2:16

A person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.

Romans 3:28

One is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

James 2:14 - 26

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder! ²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?

²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” – and he was called a friend of God.

²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵ And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? ²⁶ For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

Dispute with Roman Catholicism

- justification happens at end of your life, on basis of good works
- but Protestant Reformation – “justified by faith alone”

But v. 24 – “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone”

- distinction between “dead faith” and “true faith”
- true faith always produces good works | live tree produces fruit
- good works are not basis of justification, but fruit of justification

Example of Abraham

- v. 22 – “faith was active along with his works”
- true faith is never alone, but active with works

- v. 22 – “and faith was completed by his works”
- “completed” is Greek word τελειόω, which means “fulfilled”
- faith is a promise that is fulfilled by good works

Notes

Introduction to Hebrews

- author is unknown – probably not Paul
- author knew Timothy (13:23) – maybe Apollos or Barnabas

Hebrews 2:3-4

³ How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, ⁴ while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Theme of Hebrews: “don’t fall away, Jesus is better”

- recipients were Jewish Christians under intense persecution
- temptation to return back to Judaism and legal protection

Hebrews 10:32-34

³² But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, ³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. ³⁴ For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

The problem of apostasy

- “fall away” in v. 12 is ἀποστασία | to abandon Christian faith
- major theme in Hebrews – 5 major “warning passages”

Major theme in New Testament

- Demas is mentioned in Colossians and Philemon as gospel worker
- Hymenaeus and Alexander in 1 Tim. 1:20 – “shipwrecked faith”

2 Timothy 4:10

For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.

Many examples in New Testament warning not fall away

Matthew 24:9-10

⁹ Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake. ¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another.

1 Timothy 4:1

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.

But troubling | many other passages speak of our eternal security

- Eph. 1:4 – “he chose us in him before the foundation of the world”
- John 10:28 – “no one will snatch them out of my hand”

How do reconcile that with these warning passages?

Hebrews 3:7-4:13 is complex passage

- interweaving 2 concepts – warning not to fall away and idea of “rest”
- text goes back and forth between these two ideas

3:7-11

- quotes from Psalm 95 – story in Exodus 17
- Meribah and Massah – “quarrelling/rebellion” and “testing”
- in wilderness, no water – grumbled and doubted, wanted to stone Moses
- God provided water by Moses striking rock

- first generation in wilderness ultimately did not enter Promised Land
- v. 11 – “as I swore in my wrath, ‘they shall not enter my rest’”

- Promise Land is described as a place of “rest”
- Biblical Theology vs. Systematic Theology

- land as “rest” from enemies and journey (Deut. 3:20, 12:10)
- not just metaphor, but deliberately evoking seventh day of creation

3:12-15

- challenging teaching – possible for Christians to fall away from Christ
- v. 14 is key: “For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.”
- “*if indeed*” – does not mean true Christians can genuinely lose faith
- conditional language is saying that true faith perseveres

Like refining gold

- how tell gold from impurities? plunge into furnace – survives
- “false faith” will fall away under adversity | Parable of Seeds
- how know something is precious? | can hold on in face of adversity?

- people in church as “Christians” but haven’t been tested
- sobering thought | not have cavalier attitude

- but “true faith” in Christ will endure hardship
- Matt. 10:22 – the one who endures to the end will be saved

How do we endure?

- v. 12 – “take care, brothers, lest be evil, unbelieving heart”
- requires effort, attention, striving | Christian life is “race”

- v. 13 – “but exhort *one another* every day”
- we don’t persevere alone, but in deep community
- b/c sin is “deceitful” | can’t see our own sin

- v. 15 – “do not harden your hearts” | metaphor of hardness
- there is a willful aspect to apostasy | refuse to yield and repent

4:1-7

- sophisticated argument | teaches us how to read Bible
- author is using “rest” in two ways | two different meanings

v. 1 – Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest *still stands*, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.

Not talking about the land anymore

- but what the land represented – true rest, eternal rest
- symbolized by God’s rest on Seventh Day
 - v. 3, “his works were finished from foundation of world”

- “rest” = New Heavens and New Earth
- Psalm 95 sees “rest” as a future event

⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God

- work out rest of analogy | also called “typology”
 - wilderness is Christian life
 - Promised Land is New Heavens and New Earth

- therefore, learn lesson of Israel in wilderness
- not enough to be inside God’s people | not enough witness miracle
- but must respond with an abiding faith

v. 11-13

- necessity of “striving” | Christian life is effortful
- allow Scripture to do its work
 - Bible is not a passive text that we study safely
 - but we submit to its probing, authoritative power

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Dispute with Roman Catholicism

- this is material break for why the Protestant Reformation happened

What is Catholic view on justification?

- they believe in justification | they believe it is a verdict
- on what grounds do we receive verdict of righteousness?
 - they believe necessity of faith | believe in necessity of grace
 - when believe, receive grace – jump-starts process, of holy life
 - receive sacraments, attend mass, do good works – end of life, verdict
- justification occurs, not beginning of Christian life, but at end
- after sanctification | for Catholics, justification is not legal fiction
- but verdict is based on actual evidence of righteousness
- very crudely – ‘justified by faith + works’

Catechism of the Catholic Church (#1990)

Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man. Justification detaches man from sin which contradicts the love of God, and purifies his heart of sin.

Catholic Church – our verdict is ultimately based on good works

- this is huge | this is nothing less than destruction of gospel
- rallying cry of Reformation – “justified by faith alone”

Read James 2:14-26

James is talking about 2 kinds of faith

- v. 18 – “you have faith and I have works” | contrasting 2 kinds of faith
- in early church, people – “faith alone” | distortion of Paul
- “all you need is faith; now I can live any way I want”
- easy-believism – one time in life, turned in prayer card, but no evidence of a changed life

James is confronting this error

- v. 17 – “so also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead”
 - dead faith versus true faith (which always accompanied by good works)
 - true faith will always produce fruit
 - Luther – “we are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone”
 - but not saying – justified by good works
 - think about tree | fruit evidence tree alive, but not source of tree’s fruit
 - not justified by works, but works is evidence of justified
 - but v. 24 – “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone”
 - speaking in short-hand | “justified [and evidenced] by works”

Example of Abraham

- v. 21 – “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?”
 - but James is not contradicting himself in v. 23 – “Abraham believed God, and counted to him as righteousness”
 - so, justified by works means justified by a faith that has works
- v. 22 – “faith was active along with his works”
- true faith is never alone, but active with works
- v. 22 – “and faith was completed by his works”
- “completed” is Greek word τελειόω, which means “fulfilled”
- faith is a promise that is fulfilled by good works