

Hebrews 9-10

1. Hebrews refers to the law as “only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities” (10:1), mere “sketches of the heavenly things” (9:23), and the Tabernacle as “a mere copy of the true one” which is “in heaven itself... in the presence of God” (9:24). This language is often compared to Plato’s theory of “forms.” “Plato spoke of the earthly world, perceived by sensory knowledge (by the earthly senses), as consisting merely of shadows of the real world, apprehended by reason alone. By the first century, even many Jewish writers (in the Diaspora) spoke of the heavens above as pure and perfect, and the earthly as bound by corruption” (IVP BBC). In Plato’s philosophy, the chair you sit on is an imperfect shadow of the ideal “form” of chair, the form enjoying the higher reality because of its immutability.

Is the author just “re-purposing” Plato’s ideas, or is there something more going on here? Where does the picture in Hebrews depart from that of Plato?

2. All mentally healthy people, Christian or not, carry an internal moral compass, the conscience (Rom 2:15, 9:1-2; 2 Cor 4:2, 5:11; 1 Cor 10:25-27). This compass may be misaligned and misleading (1 Cor 8:7-12, 4:4), as when a believer with a “weaker” conscience is offended by something which is not actually sinful. Even so, Paul warns us of the importance of following our consciences (Rom 14:23; 1 Cor 8:9-13; 1 Tim 1:19). In fact, a clear conscience is an even prerequisite in the pastorals for teaching and ministry (1 Tim 1:5, 19-20, 3:8-9).

How, according to 9:9, 14, 10:2, 22, do the old and new covenants address the effects of sin on the conscience? Why wouldn’t the atoning sacrifices of the old covenant be effective at cleansing the conscience? Isn’t it harder under the new covenant to apprehend our freedom from guilt since we don’t do anything concrete to symbolically atone for it? (Cf., though, *Fun Fact* #1, below.)

3. Our hearts are “sprinkled clean from an evil conscience” (10:22) because of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice for our sins. Yet many of us carry around feelings of guilt, whether for the sins of our years past, sins we still can’t shake, or even things we know aren’t really sins, but still wound our consciences. In our quiet, honest moments we cringe at the cruel things we’ve said to those we love, or the infractions only God can see. We know intellectually that the slate is clean, but that knowledge beads on the surface of our parched souls.
 - a. Is a tender or burdened conscience a sign we are putting ourselves under the law?
 - b. A child whose conscience is clear approaches his or her parents with head held high; the guilty child’s guilt is betrayed by language and posture. This is how we are with God. For this reason one might suggest that those who are having trouble appreciating God’s unconditional mercy

begin prayers with the phrase, “O God, I know you look on me in love...” Do you ever struggle with feelings of guilt? How do you reset your compass to reflect your being “cleansed once for all” (10:2)?

4. Hebrews speaks of the breathtaking access we have to God once we have enjoyed forgiveness in Christ: We are free to “approach the throne of grace with boldness” (4:16), “with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (10:22). We have this amazing access because of Jesus’ once-for-all sacrifice for atonement for our sins (9:26).

Our model for approaching God in prayer or worship is anything but bold. We beat our breasts and rend our garments like the tax collector, lest we betray the bad attitude of the Pharisee; we come before God with the language of the *old* covenant, quoting prayers such as Ezra 9:6,

O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens.¹

Why do we approach God as if servants, not sons and daughters (Gal 4:7), not friends (Jn 15:15)? Why do we beg God for something he’s already granted us? Does genuine humility and acknowledgment of God’s mercy require the use of old-covenant language?

5. Because “we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus,” Hebrews tells us, we should think about how to provoke (NRSV)/spur (NIV/Message)/encourage (JBP)/stimulate (NASB) one another to love and good deeds (10:24). What actions in others do you find most motivates you to “love and good deeds”?
6. Hebrews 10:26-31 warns of the dreadful consequences of walking away from the faith. This terrifying passage follows a glowing reiteration of Jeremiah’s promise that God will “remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more” (10:17), and precedes verses which indicate that some of the readers were returning to Judaism for fear of persecution.

Those of us who have no intention of leaving the faith may be tempted to pass over this passage which seems to invite angels-on-heads-of-pins arguments of whether those who leave the church were ever really saved to begin with. So why study it? First, to understand the flow of Hebrews we should know where this fits in. Second, to ignore it is to risk seduction by our cultural biases:

We are so unused to thinking of judgment at all, or of God as in any way wanting to be angry with anyone, that we bend over backwards to downplay warnings like this one and suppose they

1 Or consider the words of the traditional “prayer of humble access”: “We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table” (1979 BCP, Eucharist rite I, following the breaking of the bread).

apply only in the most extreme cases. We are probably as greatly deceived, in this respect, as were those in earlier centuries who treated these passages as a warning not so much against sinning as against baptism. (120-121)

Some possible interpretations of this passage are:

- Those who deliberately, by their own choice, walk away from a genuine faith will be lost forever
- This passage isn't describing the fate of believers who lose their salvation, but rather the prison of fear of judgment they lock themselves in when they walk away from the Church
- Those who leave the faith were never saved to begin with (the ol' standby)²
- The author himself *doesn't know* conclusively the fate of the group he is warning

Setting aside your personal doctrine, which of these makes the most sense in the flow of the letter? Which harmonizes best with Rom 11:23, which appears to address the same group?

7. It's not news that it's a serious matter to walk away from the faith. Still, Wright is right to warn us of our cultural bias against a judging God. In what *practical* ways does this passage serve as a corrective? What sub-population of our congregation, historically, tends to walk away and never return?

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Fun fact #1: Judaism distinguished between accidental, unintentional, and deliberate sins; “no sacrifice availed for the person who knowingly rejected the authority of God’s law” (IVP BBC on 10:26)—though many teachers insisted that repentance and the Day of Atonement were all that was necessary.

Fun fact #2: The warning of Hebrews 10 regarding apostasy resulted in some truly strange behavior. Some read this passage to mean that there was no forgiveness for sins committed after baptism, which led them to postpone baptism until they were near death. Novatian and his sect in the second century read this passage as condemning those who denied Christ to avoid persecution.

Fun fact #3: Thomas Aquinas wrote that the transubstantiation of the elements of the Eucharist was achieved by means not of a change in physical substance but of (Platonic) form. So when the wine “becomes” blood, it goes from being an excellent realization of the Platonic form of wine to being a very poor realization of the Platonic form of blood.

2 Either they were given a tantalizing “gift” in being allowed to experience the Holy Spirit while not part of the elect—as Calvin suggested back in chapter 6—or they never really “got it” when exposed to the gospel.