

Apostasy

Hebrews 10:26-31

Hebrews 10:26-31 speaks about apostasy. It is a warning, not to pagans, but to those in the church. In one sense, only those who claim to be God's people can become apostate. Aposteinai in Greek means to “**stand away from.**” Apostasy, therefore, means to stand away from Christ and his gospel and to stand opposed to the living God.

Who Is an Apostate?

An apostate is one who may have heard and believed the gospel and even experienced the power of the Holy Spirit in his life. Yet, in due time, he turns against the gospel and becomes an enemy of Jesus Christ. There is the potential for apostasy in every church. We can picture church people as two concentric circles: those who are determined true believers and those who are not true believers. In due time, the unbeliever will slip, and they will prove themselves to be apostates.

We find examples of apostates in both the Old and New Testaments. Saul, the first king of Israel, became an apostate, as did Judas, one of the twelve apostles. Hebrews 3 and 4 describes the apostasy of the Israelites in the wilderness. Though God had promised them rest, the vast majority of them did not enter into it *“because of their unbelief.”* The author warns, *“See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful and unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God”* (Heb. 3:12). In Hebrews 6:4-6 the author declares about such people, *“It is impossible, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance because, to their loss, they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.”* Apostates will experience the curse of everlasting destruction. The bottom of hell is reserved, not for pagans, but for those professing Christians who abandoned the gospel and became enemies of Christ and his cross.

God judges us according to the knowledge we have. The greater our knowledge, the greater our responsibility and the greater our punishment if we apostatize.

Jesus himself laid down this principle in Luke 12:47-48: *“That servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows.”* Postat

Reasons for Apostasy

The Bible gives us reasons for this deliberate turning away from the living God. The **first** is persecution, as Jesus himself warned: *“Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time, many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other”* (Matt. 24:9-10). Jesus calls such people *“rocky soil,”* because they turn away from the gospel when trouble comes (Matt. 13:20-21).

The **second** reason for apostasy is worldliness. Paul writes, *“Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me”* (2 Tim. 4:10). Jesus speaks about *“thorny soil”* Christians, who become apostate because of the worries of life, the pleasures of sin, and the deceitfulness of riches (Matt. 13:22). Worldliness can creep into us, especially in a society such as ours, where we are constantly faced with the idea that more is always better. The apostle John warns, *“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes, and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever”* (1 John 2:15-17).

Another reason for apostasy is false teachers in the church. Jesus said, *“Many false prophets will appear and deceive many people”* (Matt. 24:11). Paul wrote, *“For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear”* (2 Tim. 4:3).

How many church people today want only to hear pleasant things and be entertained! But false teaching leads to apostasy.

A **fourth** reason is neglect of God's grace. The Hebrews writer asks, ***“How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?”*** Heb. 2:3. Neglect of grace means neglect of God's word, prayer, fellowship, and worship. In the same epistle, the author cautions, ***“Let us not neglect meeting together as some are in the habit of doing”*** (Heb. 10:25). When we do not feel like going to church, we have a very serious problem and may on our way to apostasy.

Clinging to mindless traditionalism can also lead to apostasy. No matter what our religious background, when we hear the gospel, we must reject traditions that do not lead to salvation, and we must commit ourselves to following Christ. New wine cannot be contained in the old wineskins of mindless traditionalism.

How do we know if we are falling away? There is no objective evidence that one who has obeyed the gospel is indeed a Christian, other than the **daily perseverance in love and good works**, that is, a persistence in the very essence of what his confession implies. The Bible urges us to make our calling and election sure and examine ourselves to see whether we are in the faith (1 Pet. 2:10; 2 Cor. 13:5). The examination question is very simple: **Are we doing the will of God?**

Anatomy of Apostasy

The first word of verse 26 is “for,” not “if,” because the author is giving his logic for what he stated in verse 25. He was warning those who were habitually neglecting the means of grace of public worship and fellowship: ***“For if we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left.”*** In the Greek text, the first word is hekousiôs, “willfully.” The apostle is emphasizing that these people were not sinning out of ignorance, but defiantly, deliberately, knowingly, willingly, and highhandedly.

Numbers 15 condemns deliberate sinning: ***“But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or alien, blasphemes the Lord, and that person must be cut off from his people. Because he has despised the Lord’s word and broken his commands, that person must surely be cut off; his guilt remains on him*** (vv. 30-31).

Not only does such a person sin defiantly, but he also sins daily. The Greek expression here is in the present tense: ***“If we deliberately keep on sinning.”*** Sin becomes one’s habit. We must acknowledge that the Bible does not teach sinless perfection in this life. Christians sin, but they do not do so defiantly and continually. John writes, ***“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness . . . My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense, Jesus Christ, the righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins”*** (1 John 1:8-9; 2:1-2). Paul declares, ***“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted”*** (Gal. 6:1). Novatian (an antipope of the third century) said God does not forgive post-baptismal sins. Of course, this is false. His point was that Christians should avoid sin – he just took it way too far.

The thing about Apostates is that they sin deliberately, defiantly, and daily. They walk out of the light into pitch darkness, and love it. John’s gospel gives us the anatomy of such apostasy in the example of Judas. An apostle who believed in Jesus and experienced the Holy Spirit in some measure, Judas preached the gospel, healed the sick, and cast out demons. But John 13:2 tells us that while the evening meal was being served, ***“the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot,”*** meaning he had come under the devil’s influence. Verse 27 says the devil entered Judas, taking complete control. In verse 30 we are told Judas went out, leaving the new communion service, and John writes, ***“And it was night.”*** Judas turned away from the brightness of walking with Christ and chose to walk with the devil in complete darkness.

John writes of such apostates, *“They went out from among us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But their going showed that none of them belonged to us”* (1 John 2:19). Such people can be leaders, teachers, and fellow church members. But, they are false brothers, apostates, and are children of the devil.

How to Avoid Apostasy

What must we do considering this teaching, especially if we have been falling away? I would say that we should be like David. Although he sinned terribly, he chose to cast himself upon the Lord, saying, *“I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great”* (2 Sam. 24:14). Let us repent truly and believe in Jesus the Son of God. Trust in his blood that cleanses us from all sins and justifies and sanctifies us. He will save us and help us to live a holy life to the end.

Brothers and sisters beware of Korah and company, of Achan and Saul, of Judas and Demas and others, who would entice you to join in their apostasy. Above all, take heed of God’s word that speaks about the coming apostasy (Matt. 24:10-13; 1 Tim. 4:1-8; 2 Tim. 3:1-5; 1 John 2:19). Obey the gospel now, not tomorrow.

If you are a child of God, and are walking carefully, fear not. He shall keep you from falling (cf. John 6:39-40; 10:27-29). Consider Jude 24: *“To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy, to the only God our Savior, be glory, majesty, power and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord before all ages now and forevermore. Amen.”*