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Hebrews 10.11-14 and the Security of the Believer

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... by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

-- [Heb 10.14]

Introduction

As Origen said, only God knows who wrote Hebrews. The masculine participle at 11.32 indicates that the author was male. For convenience, I shall refer to him as H. We owe H. much for leaving us with such a magnificent composition, a rhetorical masterpiece. No other New Testament writing comes near it in terms of literary construction. It is full of great thoughts concerning Jesus Christ, the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him. This essay will examine Heb 10.11-14 and explore its implications for the security of the believer.

Analysis of Heb 10.11-14

This text can be divided as follows:

Table 1. Structure

11	Every [old covenant] priest stands serving every day and offering the same sacrifices repeatedly, which are never able to take away sins.
12	By contrast, this [high priest of the new covenant] has sat down at God’s right, having offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins,
13	henceforth waiting until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet;
14	by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

Note

The United Bible Societies’ *Greek New Testament* [Aland et al. 1993] lists one variant in this passage: In verse 11, a number of manuscripts have “high priest” instead of “priest”. While the witnesses that read “high priest” are not to be dismissed lightly, “priest” seems the better reading in this context.

These verses present a good example of the rhetorical tapestry woven by H. throughout his book. Verses 11 and 12 are in contrast. (For students of Greek, a $\mu\epsilon\nu \dots \delta\epsilon$ construction.) We know from the context that the priests of v. 11 are the Levites. While careful not to dismiss the former covenant and the associated priesthood, H. makes clear that these are now superseded by a better covenant and a great high priest whose single sacrifice is able to achieve what the blood of bulls and goats could not—the perfection of those approaching God. This sacrifice is sufficient for all time, not needing to be offered again and again. Whereas a Levitical priest stands every day to offer carnal sacrifices, the great high priest has taken a seat at God’s right after offering himself through the eternal Spirit. [Heb 9.14] Christ has completed his sacrificial work!

Verses 12 and 13 echo Ps 110, the same psalm that records God's oath concerning the eternal Melchizedek priest, the king of righteousness: "The Lord says to my lord, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool." [Ps 110.1 NRSV] Christ now sits in the highest accessible position, waiting until his enemies are defeated.

Verse 14 reiterates the singular and eternal nature of the great high priest's offering already mentioned in verse 12. Both the word translated as "single" and the phrase translated as "for all time" recur in verses 12 and 14. The word translated as "he has perfected" is in the perfect tense, which is used to show "a present state of affairs ... based upon an action in past time." [Keating *Learning New Testament Greek*] Perfection of the saints is the continuing result of Christ's completed sacrificial act; the everlasting effect of his sacrifice is the perfection of "those being sanctified." This last phrase translates a present, passive participle. The *aktionsart* (i.e. kind of action) indicated by the present tense is continuous; the passive voice indicates that sanctification is due to an external agent. In other words, "those being sanctified" are the subjects of a continuing process that happens **to** them rather than **by** them.

Discussion

A number of threads that are woven throughout Hebrews converge in this passage:

- The ministry of the Levitical priests is never able to take away sins. Instead, it serves as a reminder of sins. [Heb 10.3]
- Jesus Christ, the great high priest of the new covenant between God and humanity, has made a single sacrifice that **does** take away sins. In so doing, he has established the new covenant and made the old obsolete. [Heb 10.9]
- Christ has been granted the most exalted accessible position in the universe; whereas we don't yet see the ultimate outcome, all is destined to be in subjection to him. [Heb 2.8]

- Unlike the earthly priests who must **stand** to perform their sacrificial work, Christ has finished his work and now **sits**. The effects are everlasting; no other sacrifice need ever be done because God has accepted Christ's as all-sufficient. This offering alone is enough to perfect those being sanctified.

In the first century, this message would have been enough to get H. into serious trouble. (See Acts 7.56-58, for example.) Today, it is as politically incorrect as ever. Nevertheless, each point resonates with the testimony of the rest of the New Testament. The last point, pertaining to perfection of the saints, has the most direct bearing upon the subject of the "security of the believer."

Security of the believer

As I understand it, the security of the believer concerns whether or not it is possible for a believer to lose her or his salvation. This is a controversial subject. On one hand is what has been labelled the "Calvinist" view: God selects individuals for salvation. God's intention cannot be frustrated: His grace is irresistible. [Treadwell *The Calvinistic "TULIP"*] On the other hand is the "Arminian" view that salvation once obtained can be lost. According to John Wesley, the difference between the two positions is simply put: "Is predestination absolute or conditional?" The Arminians believe, it is conditional; the Calvinists, that it is absolute." [Wesley 1872]

In a similar vein, we may ask the question: "Is sanctification absolute or conditional?" Or, to put it another way, "Can a believer prevent her or his own sanctification?"

What does scripture say on the matter?

H. makes clear that the believer plays a part in sanctification and can frustrate it. If this is not true, why else would he have included such dire warnings against turning from the living God? (E.g. Heb 2.1-4, 3.7-4.1, 6.3-8, 10.26-31, 12.15-17, 12.25-29.) By reference to the Exodus, H. says that those who have been evangelized can rebel. There is an **if** to salvation: "whose house we are **if** we hold fast..." [Heb 3.6] Christ is the author of eternal salvation to all who **obey** him. [Heb 5.9]

H. makes equally plain that the key to remaining on the path of sanctification is faith. It is by faith that the elders received their commendation. [Heb 11.2] “We who have believed enter that rest,” and “those who enter God’s rest also cease from their labors as God did from his.” [Heb 4.3, 4.10 NRSV] This faith is not a lightweight acknowledgment of some creed; rather, it is an active journey to the city of God marked by trust, obedience and faithfulness towards God: “make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience...” [Heb 4.11 NRSV] Chapter eleven is a portrait of what this kind of faith is; the Israelites whose bodies litter the wilderness are examples of what it is not.

The rest of the New Testament agrees that a believer can start well and end badly. A few examples suffice to make the point. Christ himself says,

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’ [Matt 7.15-23 NRSV]

Luke records the episode of Simon Magus:

Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for

as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money! You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness." Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me." [Acts 8.13-24 NRSV]

Paul of Tarsus gives himself as an example of someone whose salvation is not guaranteed:

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified. [1 Cor 9.24-27 NRSV]

Some may argue over differences between predestination, salvation, and sanctification, or whether the ones spoken of here were true believers. However the point remains that these texts would seem redundant if it were not possible for believers to fall away from the grace of God.

What, then, are we to make of the present, passive participle of Heb 10.14 which implies that the saints **receive** sanctification rather than **achieve** it?

Sustainable sanctification

One could say that this refers to the impossibility of achieving perfection because of former sins: Christ's sacrifice is necessary to cover the sins that occurred before repentance. This view is certainly in line with H.'s thinking, and is consistent with a phrase such as "the spirits of the righteous made perfect". [Heb 12.23] However, the continuous *aktionsart* of the present participle still indicates that sanctification is an ongoing process—something that happens in many and various ways instead of once and for all (borrowing H.'s words at Heb 1.1 and 7.27).

It is silly to base a theology on the analysis of a single Greek participle. Perhaps it is more fruitful to take a step back and look at the implications of both poles of the argument. At one end of the spectrum we have, "whoever is chosen by God for salvation will be saved." When asked about the believer's potential for failure, the proponent of this view says that no matter what her or his actions, in the end this person will be saved. At the other end, "Christ's salvation is only effective for those who repent and do not subsequently sin in a blatant way." The proponent of this view will have less trouble explaining away certain parts of the New Testament, including large parts of Hebrews. Even so, this position seems to me just as unsustainable as the first when it comes to real believers.

I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. This is not an automatic qualification for salvation. After all, demons believe as much. [Mark 1.23-24] Christ requires repentance, a changed life. This is a matter of the will, and it is a struggle. I know what a miserable sinner I am. I know the good I should do, but do not do it. I know the evil I should not do, but do it. I deserve to be condemned.

What hope is there for me? I am such a hopeless case that my only hope is God's irresistible grace. I know myself and my proclivity for blatant sin. I therefore know that if my salvation depends on me keeping a perfect conscience before God then I am doomed. It would be nice to believe that my salvation is nothing to do with me. But, in all truth, this seems wrong. "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow." [Gal. 6.7 NRSV]

What a wretch I am! I know that there is no hope for me if I really must be righteous in order to be made perfect. Nothing is so plain to me as the experience of my present and continuing unrighteousness. This is where I hope and pray for continuing sanctification by the Captain of our salvation—something that happens to me and not by me. God be merciful to me, a sinner.

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