

“Vital Signs”

Hebrews 10:32-34

When someone collapses or is found unconscious, the first thing a medically-trained person will do is check for “vital signs.” They will look to see if there is breath, listen for a heartbeat and check blood pressure. They are searching for evidence that the person is still alive, and they know what to look for because all living persons have certain indicators in common. These are called “vital signs” and the name simply means signs that life is present. Finding these indicators is great news, but no one thinks of them as a great achievement. They are something to be thankful for, not proud of because no one earns them, we are simply born with them. True, some have stronger heartbeats than others, and some have deeper lung capacity than others, but the life to which these point is a gift of God.

The author of Hebrews has just finished warning his readers that it is possible to abandon Jesus and return to spiritual death (10:26-31), but though some of his readers are in danger of doing this he still has hope they will repent before crossing that line. In the verses we’re reading today he explains why: He says there is solid evidence they started out their spiritual life with God’s “vital signs” in them and it’s hard to kill that kind of life.

This passage reminds us that when a person is born-again deep changes inevitably occur in their attitudes and behavior. A new living power enters and its presence cannot be hidden. Some of these changes are listed here, and if such vital signs had not been present we sense the author would categorize his readers differently: as those who were never really born-again (“enlightened,” v 32) rather than those in danger of committing the sins listed in verse 29. He has hope they will still make the right decision because he is sure God is still inside them and he knows God is always willing to “strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble” (He 12:12).

A. The Problem: People who apparently became a Christian but don’t obey God. Three examples:

- A woman whose brother had been raised in church and wanted to be a preacher at the age of ten, but since 12 has totally lived in the world.
- A woman whose daughter was baptized as a girl but a few years ago converted to another religion (“is she hopelessly lost?”)
- A man who continued to use pornography for many years. Though this was confessed to other men, those men also used it and no one took any radical steps to force change. They merely comforted one another with the thought they were forgiven.

We often struggle over the extent of God’s grace because so many seem to be taking advantage of it. But if the new covenant actually works the changes in us that God promised (He 8:10-12) then the problem isn’t with grace, it’s with our incomplete presentation of the gospel which has allowed rebellious hearts to think they are saved. Both repentance and faith in Christ must be present or the new birth hasn’t taken place.

B. The Question: Were they really converted in the first place, or just assented to Christian doctrine and went through our initiation ceremonies?

- Remember: The grace in Hebrews is based on the assumption that the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is taking place inside that person... that He has changed their heart...
- The threat of the Law has been removed because the desire to obey the Law has been put into the heart.
- If the desire to obey is not there, grace becomes an excuse to keep sinning without fear of punishment.

Did that person who renounced Christ or lived a fruitless life ever really receive the new birth or were they merely a cultural Christian? Actually, only God knows for sure, and it’s not our place to announce the verdict (“judge not lest ye be judged”). I must admit John says we can “see” a person who commits a “sin unto death” and tells us to stop praying (1Jn 5:16). But putting myself in the position to announce who has committed the unpardonable sin of apostasy seems very dangerous to me. I think it’s better to err on the side of hoping and praying unless and until the Holy Spirit actually says “stop.”



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C. Vital Signs: Hebrews 10:32-34

The author of Hebrews says he's confident these believers were truly born-again because of the changes that took place in their attitudes and behavior were evidence they had God living inside them. What vital signs did he see:

- v 32 – Enlightened (Jn 3:3, spiritual revelation)
- v 32 – Their faith got them in trouble
- v 33 – Their love caused them to care for suffering believers
- v 34 – They joyfully suffered for Christ
- v 34 – Their love of the things of the world declined
- v 34 – They had faith in the rewards of eternal life

Here are others who say there must be evidence of real change:

- John the Baptist (Lk 3:3-14) “fruit in keeping with repentance”
- Jesus (Mt 7:17-23) good fruit, “depart from Me...”
- John: (1Jn 2:4) obedience; (1Jn 2:9; 3:14, 17) love for one another; (1Jn 2:22, 23; 4:15; 5:1, 10, 12) divinity of Christ; (1Jn 3:24; 4:13) indwelling Spirit

D. The Caution: We need to recognize there are people who never went far enough to be changed.

- Repentance (full surrender) may come years after a person confessed Jesus as Savior.
- This is often true because we don't present repentance as part of the gospel. It is seen as optional.
- Some people seem to intuitively understand that believing in Jesus includes submission and trust, others don't.

E. Conclusion

God's grace is not the cause of Christian hypocrisy. Grace is meant to function in an atmosphere where there is:

- A full gospel that produces the new covenant changes in those who believe.
- A healthy fear of God and the power of sin that motivates believers to find real freedom from addictive sin.
- A sober acceptance by each believer of their responsibility to feed their spirit for the rest of their life.
- A community of believers who will pray for and reach out to those who appear to be “drifting away.”

F. Questions

- What changes took place in you when you first became a Christian? Did anyone else notice these changes?
- When you first prayed to receive Christ did anyone tell you that you needed to repent and surrender to His will for your life? If not, when did you do this?