Exegetical Paper_Hebrews_10-26-31

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Abstract

The warning passage of Hebrews 10:26-31 is one of five such passages in the book of Hebrews and has been considered by many the direst in its discussion of apostasy. These passages have been the focal point of significant divisive debate throughout church history. In this paper, while keeping with a "once saved-always saved" doctrinal belief, it will be shown that an objective exegesis, given pre-understandings within an evangelical cultural background and presuppositions developed through the influential preaching and teaching of many evangelical pastors, can arrive at the plain meaning of the text intended by the original author to the original recipients. The key exegetical issues hinge upon the salvation status of the addresses of the epistle and biblical definition of apostasy. Once these issues are determined, then an understanding of the difference between loss of salvation and abrogation of salvation comes into view.
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Thesis Statement

A Spiritually-guided and rational exegesis of this “warning passage” of Hebrews 10:26-31 will yield an interpretation consistent with “faith-based” salvation by grace and is defensible against the loss of salvation doctrine of "works-based" religions.

Introduction

The warning passage of Hebrews 10:26-31 is one of five such passages in the book of Hebrews. These passages have been the focal point of significant divisive debate throughout church history. In this paper, while keeping in mind my Southern Baptist "once saved-always saved" doctrinal belief, I will conduct as objective an exegesis as is within my grasp given my pre-understandings within my cultural background and presuppositions developed through the influential preaching and teaching of many evangelical pastors. I will endeavor to follow the sound hermeneutical and exegetical practices outlined by Duvall and Hays in Grasping God's Word and Klein Blomberg and Hubbard in Introduction to Biblical Interpretation. Ultimately, I hope to arrive at an interpretation which is defensible because it is built upon the historical-cultural context meaning of the passage within the constraints of the literary genre imposed upon any epistle. Gordon Fee states, "Our task is to find out what the text originally meant; this is called exegesis."¹

Main Idea and Outline of Hebrews 10:26-31

Main Idea: If we purposely continue sinning (10:26) by not living in the “new way” of 10:22-24 [after becoming a believer], then we are in trouble because there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins (10:26) since Jesus has put an end to sacrifice [relating back to 10:12, 14, 18].

¹Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All Its worth, Third ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 15.
I. Jesus’ one-time for all sacrifice [relating back to 10:12, 14, 18] has put an end to sacrifice (10:26).


III. Without Christ only the terrifying prospect God’s wrath can be expected (10:27; cf. Is. 26:11).

IV. Under the Law, anyone who transgresses the covenant by worshipping or serving false gods is put to physical death on the testimony of at least two witnesses (10:28; cf. Deut. 17:6).

V. Likewise he who usurps Jesus by denying “the new covenant in My blood (Matt. 26:28; Mk. 14:24; Lk. 22:20) commits blasphemy against the Spirit (Mt. 12:31; Mk. 3:29) (10:29).

VI. We can be assured that God will keep His promise to judge the unrighteous (10:30).

VII. It is terrifying to receive God’s eternal condemnation (10:31; cf. Det. 32:35-36).

Context of the Passage

The book of Hebrews is somewhat unique in that it contains no specific internal support of either the author of the epistle or the location of the original intended readership. A survey of scholarship does, however, shed some light on the key interpretive context of the ethnicity of the intended readers.

*Historical-Cultural Context of Hebrews*

Often times, the provenance of a biblical book is of importance in assessing the historical-cultural influence in which the author wrote and the original recipients read the book.
Duvall and Hays assert that a valid interpretation of biblical texts cannot be inconsistent with the historical-cultural context of the text.\(^2\)

*The recipients:* The original readers of the book of Hebrews can be inferred to have been a group or "house church" of Hellenistic Jewish Christians who were evangelized secondhand whose Christian development had stopped and perhaps had even slipped back to the "old way."\(^3\) Their understanding of the Temple cult of ritual sacrifice was most likely one that had resulted from reading the Old Testament rather than first-hand experience in Jerusalem.\(^4\) Calvin takes for granted that the Jews receiving the epistle had already “made profession” of Jesus Christ but needed proof of what "the office of Christ" was. Calvin states, "It was necessary for him[author] to show what He [Christ] was for they did not yet clearly understand the end, the effect, and the advantages of His coming; but being taken up with a false view of the Law, they laid hold on the shadow instead of the substance."\(^5\) By this we see the classical Reformed Theology of Calvin who considers the recipients as a mixture of regenerate and unregenerate church members. Guthrie also holds with the original recipients being Hellenistic Jewish regenerate Christians, but no specific ethnic demographical composition can be determined for the recipients of Hebrews because many Gentiles participated in the Jewish synagogue system as either proselytes or God-fearers.\(^6\)

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\(^3\)F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 9.

\(^4\)Ibid.


\(^6\)George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary ; from Biblical Text... to Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 20.
Date: Placing the writing of Hebrews to a date is important in guiding a historical-cultural interpretation of the selected passage. Carson and Moo see possible dates for Hebrews of between A.D. 60 and 100 but assert, "The preponderance of evidence favors a date before 70." Likewise, MacArthur, Bruce, and Guthrie consistently date the letter before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. If correct, the recipients of the epistle would still have the Temple sacrificial cult in Jerusalem within the scope of their comprehended reality. Perhaps an important consideration in light of the substantial space the author of Hebrews devotes to proving the supremacy of Christ priesthood over the Levitical priesthood and the eternal nature of Christ's sacrifice as compared to the temporary limitations of the sacrificial system familiar to Jews.

Destination: While some scholarship points to a Roman destination for the epistle, the evidence is far from conclusive. While Guthrie supports the destination of the book of Hebrews to likely have been a house church in or near the city of Rome: "from Italy" in Hebrews 13:24 may refer to Acts 18:2, the word "leader" in Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24 which also occurs in I Clement and the Shepherd of Hermas, both of which have been taken as referring to the Roman Church. Most scholars draw inference surrounding the phrase "those from Italy" (13:24) but Bruce is persuaded by Harnack who envisages the epistle being sent to a "small conservative enclave within it [Rome] that clung to a more conservative principle of traditional Judaism are the recipients of the epistle. Further, Guthrie holds that Clement of Rome quoted extensively

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9George H. Guthrie, Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary ; from Biblical Text... to Contemporary Life, 21.
10F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews, 13-14.
from Hebrews in his pastoral letter to the Corinthians thus indicating the earliest use of the book of Hebrews as a scriptural reference source being based in Rome.\textsuperscript{11} Carson and Moo acknowledge the scholarship of Harnack; however are not as dogmatically insistent in concluding a Roman destination stating, "[It] is as good a guess as any, but it is not much more than a guess. Fortunately, few exegetical issues depend on determining the geographic location of the addressees."\textsuperscript{12}

\textit{Occasion:} The occasion for writing Hebrews is to address the potential danger lying in the temptation to reject Christianity and return to Judaism proper.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Literary Context of Hebrews 10:26-31}

The immediate context of Hebrews 10:26-31 is the preceding passage of Hebrews 10:19-25 which sets forth three manifestations of regenerate living: "let us draw near with a sincere heart," "let us hold fast the confession of our hope," and "let us consider how to stimulate one another" (10:22-24) and the passage that follows (Hebrews 10:32-39) which is an exhortation to the recipients emphasizing "endurance" and "persevering" (10:36, 39).

The larger context of Hebrews 10:26-31 is that it is one of the five "warning passages" within the Hebrews Epistle. The other warning passages are found in 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; and 12:1-29. Scott McKnight posits, "The warning passages in Hebrews share a common form: each has four elements or components. In each warning passage we find: (1) the subjects or audience who are either committing or in danger of committing, (2) the sin that leads to (3) the

\textsuperscript{11}George H. Guthrie, \textit{Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary ; from Biblical Text... to Contemporary Life}, 21.


\textsuperscript{13}George H. Guthrie, \textit{Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary ; from Biblical Text... to Contemporary Life}, 20.
exhortation which, if not followed, leads to (4) the consequences of that sin."  

Thus a legitimate exegesis will take consider the larger context of all five warning passages in order to shed light upon what the author intends his readers to understand.  

The still larger context is to keep in our view that The Book of Hebrews is considered to belong to the genre of epistle. The literary genre is important because it acts as a framework in which to understand the author's words as inspired by the Holy Spirit. Understanding that Hebrews is an epistle determines that it was written to address situations or occasions that need to be reconstructed in order to properly interpret what the original author intended to communicate to the original recipients prior to deriving any modern-day applicability.  

Exegesis of Hebrews 10:26-31


26 For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,  
27 but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES.  
28 Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.  
29 How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?  
30 For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE  

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15 Ibid., 26-27.  
16 MacArthur refers to Hebrews as a letter (MacArthur, x). Bruce states, "The Epistle to the Hebrews is no intruder into the New Testament" (Bruce, 34). Calvin states, "Not only various opinions were formerly entertained as to the author of this Epistle, but it was only at a late that it was received by the Latin Churches" (Calvin, 416-33). It is only Guthrie who holds that Hebrews is "a sermon rather than a letter." (Guthrie, 24)  
18 Ibid., 229-230.
LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE." It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Hebrews 10:26-31, NASB)

Sentence and Paragraph Observations

The rational exegesis begins with careful detailed observation of the text in view. This is not an interpretive stage of exegesis so implications of the text are not considered. The textual observations for the selected passage are illustrated in Figure 1.

Repetition of words: for, we, on, the, of, a, terrifying, and, will, who, has, he, God, is

Contrasts: there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES

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Comparisons / similarities. Verse 28 → Verse 29

Lists: Who:

a. “Has set aside the Law of Moses”

b. “Has trampled under foot the son of God”

c. “Has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant”

d. “Has insulted the Spirit of grace”

Cause and Effect: Cause: 10:12: “but He [Jesus] having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time…” 10:14 “for by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.” 10:18 “now where there is forgiveness of these things [10:17] there is no longer any offering for sin.” (10:19-20) “Confidence to enter the holy Place by the blood of Jesus…by a new and living way” AND 10:21 “we have a great high priest over the house of God”

Effect A: 10:22 “let us draw near with a sincere heart”

Effect B: 10:23 “hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering”

Effect C: 10:24 “stimulate one another to love and good deeds”

Rationale 10:26 [relating back to 10:12, 14, 18]: “if we purposely continue sinning by not living in the “new way” of 10:22-24 [after becoming a believer], then we are in trouble because there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins since Jesus has put an end to sacrifice

Rationale 10:30: “for we know Him who said vengeance is mine, I will repay”

Figures of Speech: “hands of the living God” (10:31) What is meant?

Conjunctions: and, but, or

Verbs: go, remains, consume, has (four times) trampled, was, know, said, is (two times), judge, fall,

Pronouns: we (two times), anyone, who (two times), he (two times) him, I, his, it,
Questions and answers: 10:29 “How much severer punishment do you think will
deserve who has trampled under foot the son of God and has regarded as unclean the blood of the
covent by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the spirit of grace?”

Dialogue: none in this passage.

Means: 10:29 "he was sanctified by the blood of the covenant"
10:28 "anyone dies without mercy by setting aside the law of Moses"

Purpose/Results Statements: general to specific and specific to general:

Conditional clauses: 10:26-27 "if we go on… After receiving… The truth, there no
longer remains a sacrifice for sins."

Action/roles of God/people:

a. action by people 1- 10:28 "set aside the law of Moses"
b. action by people 2- 10:29 "trampled the son of God under foot"
c. action by people 3- 10:29 "regarded the blood of the covenant as unclean"
d. action by people 4- 10:29 "insulted the Spirit of grace"

Emotional terms: terrifying (two times).

Tone: overall tone of the passage is alarmingly emphatic

Analysis of Key Words

The previously identified key words require additional study by referring back to the
original Greek in order to develop the fullest meaning of the text. "sinning" Αµαρτανοντων
present active participle of άµαρτάνων "hamartanō" to act contrary to the will and law of God so,

“when sinning.” "willfully" εκουσιώς "hekousiōs “purposely.” "after" μετα meta (preposition)

20All Greek transliterations taken from Strong’s Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries Electronic Edition STEP
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from Louw & Nida: NT Greek-English Lexicon The Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on
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“after.” "receiving" λαµβάνω lambanō 'to accept, to receive, to come to believe.' ” "knowledge" ἐπίγνωσις epignōsis the content of what is definitely known - 'what is known, definite knowledge, full knowledge, knowledge.' ” "truth" ἀλήθεια alētheia the content of that which is true and thus in accordance with what actually happened - 'truth’” "remains" ἀπολείπω apoleipō to cause or permit something to remain in a place and to go away (with or without implying purpose) - 'to leave, to leave behind.’” "terrifying" φοβερός phoberos pertaining to something or someone who causes fear - 'fearful, causing fear.' ” "expectation" ἐκδοχή eko dhēi to expect something to happen, often implying waiting - 'to expect, expectation.' "anyone" τίς tis (pronoun) a reference to someone or something indefinite, spoken or written about - 'someone, something, anyone, a, anything.' "dies" ἀποθνῄσκει aposthēskē the process of dying - 'to die, death.' "severer" χείρον cheirōn pertaining to being less satisfactory than something else - 'worse.' "punishment" τιµωρίας timorēia punishment. "deserve" ἀξιωθῆσεται (future passive of ἀξίοω axioô to consider something of a comparable merit or worth - 'to regard as worthy of, to consider as meriting, to regard as being valuable for.') so, “shall be regarded worthy.” "trampled under foot" καταπατῶ katapateō to step down forcibly upon, often with the implication of destruction or ruin - 'to trample on.' "regarded" ἰδέομαι hēgeomai to hold a view or have an opinion with regard to something - 'to hold a view,' ‘to have an opinion,’ ‘to consider,’ ‘to regard.’ "unclean" κοινὸς koinos pertaining to being ritually unacceptable, either as the result of defilement or because of the very nature of the object itself (for example, ritually unacceptable animals) - 'defiled, ritually unclean.' "sanctified" ἁγιάζω hagiazō to cause someone to have the quality of holiness - 'to make holy.' "insulted" ἐνυβρίζω enubrizō to speak against someone in an insolent and arrogant way - 'to insult.' "know" οἰδαµεν (perfect active of οἶκειος eidō), one who belongs
to a particular household or extended family - 'member of a family, relative.' “to know like a family member.” "fall" ἐμπίπτω empiptō to fall into a particular point or location - 'to fall in(to).

In summary, the historical-cultural context of the passage alludes to the original author and recipients being thoroughly versed in the Septuagint Old Testament. In all likelihood, the author and recipients were either Jews who converted to Christianity or Jewish proselytes who converted to Christianity. The book was probably written prior to the restructuring of the Temple in A.D. 70. Now, with the historical-cultural context known according to the literary genre and context established for Hebrews 10:26-31. Key observations in the passage have been made. An interpretation of what the text meant to the original recipients can be posited.

Posited Interpretation of Hebrews 10:26-31 (NASB)

10:26: The author identifies himself with the recipients who have accepted and come to believe that which is definitely known-the truth (Jesus Christ). The author is warning the readers that if they purposefully continue to live contrary to the will and law of God that they are in real trouble because, even though they are Hebrew, Jesus has eliminated once and for all the sacrificial system of the Temple with His superior sacrifice. The author suggests that if the readers do not manifest the "Christian" life of “let us draw near with a sincere heart”, “hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering”, and “stimulate one another to love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:22-24), Jesus’ one-time for all sacrifice [relating back to 10:12, 14, 18] has put an end to sacrifice.

10:27: Therefore without Jesus Christ to intercede before God the only remaining prospect for the readers is the fearful expectation of experiencing the "fury of a fire" wrath of God reserved for the enemies of God (cf. Is. 26:11).
10:28: The author then reminds the Jewish Christians that under the Law, anyone who transgresses the covenant by worshipping or serving false gods is put to physical death on the testimony of at least two witnesses (cf. Deut. 17:6).

10:29: Going further, the author draws a lesser-to-greater comparison to a worse punishment in store for anyone who commits three Trinitarian offenses will have made themselves worthy of receiving in God’s eyes: (1) anyone who has trampled on (destroyed) Jesus Christ; (2) anyone who regards or holds that His sacrifice is ritually unacceptable and defiled like an unclean animal (Matt. 26:28; Mk. 14:24; Lk. 22:20); (3) anyone who has committed spoken blasphemy against the Spirit in an insolent and arrogant way (Mt. 12:31; Mk. 3:29).

10:30: The readers are reminded that they know God intimately well so they can be assured that God will keep His promise to judge the unrighteous (cf. Det.32:35-36).

10:31: It is fearful prospect to fall into the control of the living God.

In summary, the author is detailing a life of a believer who apostatizes as is exemplified by public prideful continual rebellion and renunciation of the sanctification before God through Jesus Christ. They would have understood the author is not talking about the sin that "occasionally ensnares us." The readers would have understood that the author is urging them to press on toward Christ and not forsake, abandon, or forfeit their salvation. The *crux interpretum* hinges upon the first century understanding of apostasy. When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, some 15 to 20 years earlier than the dating of Hebrews; the Thessalonians were worried that the *Parousia* had already occurred, Paul reminds them that "the apostasy comes first" (2 Thessalonians 2:3). Apostasy (*ἀποστασία* apostasia: to rise up in open defiance of authority, with the presumed intention to overthrow it or to act in complete opposition to its demands - 'to rebel against, to revolt, to engage in insurrection, rebellion) in the end times is generally
associated with the Antichrist of which Jesus spoke in Matthew 24:15-16 and Paul describes further as "the man of lawlessness… son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the Temple of God, displaying himself as being God" (2 Thessalonians 2:2-3). First century Christians would have understood that Apostasy involves things like knowingly preaching doctrinal deception, publicly promoting moral insensitivity, and wholehearted ethical departures from God’s truth.

**Defense of Interpretation**

The defense of the interpretation rests upon two determinations: understanding what apostasy is and is not and the recipients of Hebrews are in fact, "believers." The first issue, apostasy has been demonstrated to be significantly beyond the occasional sin – even habitual sin – with which the believer "struggles," the occasionally missed Sunday worship service, or the neglect of visitation because the believer still understands these are sins and that Jesus’ atoning sacrifice is sufficient before God to maintain salvation.\(^{21}\) Bruce states in relation to Galatians 6:1, "The context suggests that something much more serious is in his mind than what Paul calls a being "overtaken in any trespass."\(^{22}\) Calvin states, "but Christ sacrificed is efficacious to the godly even to death, though they often sin; nay, it retains ever if its efficacy, for this very reason, because they cannot be free from sin as long as they dwell in the flesh. The apostle then refers to those alone who wickedly forsake Christ, and thus deprive themselves of the benefit of his death."\(^{23}\) The second issue, while significantly more complicated today, was straightforward in the first century. Bruce notes, "This passage was destined to have repercussions in Christian

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\(^{21}\) F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 261.

\(^{22}\) F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 261.

\(^{23}\) John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentary on Hebrews - Enhanced Version (Calvin's Commentaries)*, Kindle, 4197-4215.
history beyond what are author could have foreseen." The context of verse 26 clearly indicates that the warning is issued to believers. The author employs the first person pronoun "us" or "we" meaning he identifies himself as part of the group "after receiving knowledge of the truth." MacArthur would disagree with this interpretation of 10:26 and adopts the very popular view that the author is writing to those who had made only a superficial commitment to Christ. MacArthur's scholarship is, itself, superficial in this case for he states, "When the gospel of Jesus Christ is presented to an unbeliever, only two responses are possible...he either believes and is saved or he disbelieves and becomes apostate." Most certainly, an extreme oversimplification of the evangelism process is apparently understood by MacArthur if he does not even consider that few people accept the gospel upon only one hearing. Decker would agree with the previous observations of the author's use of "us" or "we" and the reception of "the knowledge of the truth." Decker would amplify the argument that the inclusion of the word "sanctified" in 10:29 and that the readers are "enlightened" in 10:31. Finally, there is Guthrie who asserts that the hearers being addressed in 10:26 are believers (10:24-25) being warned by the preacher about turning away from God.

24 F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews, 261.


**Application**

Based on the interpretation developed the application for the Christian of today that flows forward is first and foremost that salvation is "by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). While nothing in Hebrews 10:26-31 suggests that salvation can be earned or "lost," It is definitely evident that believers can willfully abandon and abrogate salvation through apostasy but that apostasy must be clearly understood as extreme enmity toward God; not merely going "prodigal" for a season. Believers are exhorted to avoid this altogether through perseverance and endurance as exemplified by the lifestyle portrayed in Hebrews 10:22-25. The key issue to be understood in 10:26-31 is the magnitude and gravity of "apostasy." In the words of Scott McKnight, "The evidence suggests that those who have committed this sin are not, in fact, worried about it or fearful of having committed it. The evidence suggests, on the contrary, that they are proud of it; they are boastful of their defiance of God’s will.”

**Conclusion**

The exegesis I have conducted has resulted in an interpretation generally consistent with that of Scott McKnight. The commentators are split on the regenerate status of the recipients. Calvin, of course, holds with the Reformed Theology view. MacArthur whose scholarship lacked the analytical depth of Bruce and Guthrie retreated to the safety of his Reformed Theology. On the other hand, Bruce’s and Guthrie’s commentaries are in agreement that the recipients of the warning passage of Hebrews 10:26-31 were first century regenerate believers of primarily Jewish background. The warning passage of Hebrews 10:26-31 is one of five such passages in the book of Hebrews but contains the direst and sobering illustrations of apostasy and the horrific consequences that are possible. This passage is likely one of the most difficult biblical passages
to interpret, and as such the focal point of significant divisive debate throughout church history; however, it is not beyond the reach of sound exegetical methodology. While striving to be as objective and open minded as possible within my pre-understandings and preconceptions, I have conducted as objective an exegesis as was within my grasp utilizing the tools and methods set forth in *Grasping God's Word* and *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. I have demonstrated that a Spiritually-guided and rational exegesis of Hebrews 10:26-31 will yield an interpretation consistent with “faith-based” salvation by grace which again prevails over "works-based" religions. Further, I defended my interpretation against that of well-known authors and established Bible commentators. Finally, I have not arrived at an "all-new" unique interpretation but this was not my goal. I believe I have faithfully discharge my responsibility of 2 Timothy 2:15 to “handle accurately the word of truth."
Bibliography


