

# QUESTIONS FROM THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

Dr. Norman Geisler  
(excerpted from *When Critics Ask*)

## **HEBREWS 2:10—If Jesus was already perfect, how could He be made perfect through suffering?**

**PROBLEM:** The Bible declares that Jesus was absolutely perfect and without sin, even in His human nature (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22; 3:18; 1 John 3:3). But according to this verse, Jesus was made “perfect through sufferings.” But to be made perfect implies that He was not perfect to begin with, which is a contradiction.

**SOLUTION:** Jesus was absolutely and unchangeably perfect in His divine nature. God is perfect (Matt. 5:48), and He cannot change (Mal. 3:6; Heb. 6:18). But Jesus was also human, and as such was subject to change, though without sin. For example, “Jesus increased in wisdom and stature” (Luke 2:52). If his knowledge as a man increased, then his experience also did. Thus, He “learned obedience by the things which He suffered” (Heb. 5:8). In this sense He was “made perfect” in that He experienced the perfecting work of suffering in His own sinless life (cf. Job 23:10; Heb. 12:11; James 1:2-4). That is, He gained all the experiential benefits of suffering without sinning (Heb. 4:15). In this way He can be of real comfort and encouragement to those who suffer.

## **HEBREWS 2:14—Does the devil have the power of death or does God?**

**PROBLEM:** The writer of Hebrews speaks here about Christ’s coming so “that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.” But in other places the Bible asserts that only God has the power over life and death: “I kill and I make alive” (Deut. 32:39; cf. Job 1:21).

**SOLUTION:** God is sovereign over all life. Only He can create it, and only He has determined the number of our days (Ps. 90:10-12) and has “appointed” the day of our death (Heb. 9:27). But by tempting Adam and Eve, the devil succeeded in bringing on the human race God’s pronounced judgment of death for disobedience (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 5:12). So, in this sense, the devil may be said to have had the power of death (Heb. 2:14). However, by tasting death for every man (Heb. 2:9) and rising triumphantly from the grave (Rom. 4:25), Christ now holds “the keys of Hades and of Death” (Rev. 1:18), having “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10).

## **HEBREWS 2:17-18—Was it possible for Christ to have sinned?**

**PROBLEM:** The writer of Hebrews says that Christ “had to be made like His brethren in all things. . . . For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted” (2:17-18, NASB). Does this mean that Christ could have sinned?

**SOLUTION:** Some argue that Christ *could not* have sinned. They believe that our Lord was tempted like we are and that He can sympathize with our weaknesses, but that He was incapable of sinning. In support of this view they argue, first, that since Christ was God, and since God cannot sin (Heb. 6:18; James 1:13), it follows that Christ could not sin either. Second, since Christ had no fallen human nature, as we do, He had no propensity to sin. Finally, they observe that His temptation was only from without, not from within. Hence, He could be tempted without having the real possibility of sinning.

Other orthodox scholars believe that Christ had the ability to sin (since He had the power of free choice), but did not sin. In short, sin was possible, but not actual in Jesus' life. To deny this possibility, they believe, would deny His full humanity, His ability to "sympathize with our weaknesses" (Heb. 4:15), and would make His temptation into a charade. They note that while Jesus could not sin *as God*, nonetheless, He could have sinned (but didn't) *as man*. Since Jesus had two natures, one divine and one human, a distinction must be made in what He could do in each nature. For example He could not get tired, hungry, or sleepy as God. But He did all of these as man. His divine nature could not die. Yet He died as a man. Likewise, they argue, Christ could not have sinned as God but could have sinned as man.

### **HEBREWS 5:7a—Did Christ have flesh only before his resurrection?**

**PROBLEM:** Speaking of the "days of His [Jesus] flesh" as past seems to imply that Jesus did not rise in the flesh and ascend into heaven in the same physical body in which He died. Yet Jesus Himself said that His resurrection body was one of "flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39) and the *Apostles' Creed* confesses the "resurrection of the flesh."

**SOLUTION:** The phrase "days of His flesh" simply refers to Jesus' *earthly sojourn*. It affirms nothing about the nature of the resurrection body. It is clear from many passages that Jesus rose in literal, physical, human flesh (see Luke 24:39; 1 John 4:2-3).

### **HEBREWS 5:7b - Did Christ shrink from death or face it courageously?**

**PROBLEM:** On the one hand, it would seem that Christ shrunk from death, since He prayed "with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death" (Heb. 5:7). He said, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me" (Matt. 26:39). On the other hand, we are led to believe that He faced death obediently and boldly, for He "steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51), calmly facing His arrest, trial, and crucifixion, and repeatedly assuring His disciples He would rise again (Matt. 12:40-42; John 10:18).

**SOLUTION:** Christ faced death *boldly* but not *eagerly*. He met it *willingly* but not *apathetically*. Christ was "obedient to the point of death" (Phil. 2:8). He approached it boldly and bravely, declaring, "I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again" (John 10:18). He willingly submitted to the Father, saying, "not as I will, but as You will" (Matt. 26:39).

Christ's willingness and boldness notwithstanding, He nevertheless felt the full emotional and existential impact of His impending death. He did pray with "vehement cries and tears," but the writer adds, He "was heard because of His godly fear" (Heb. 5:7). Jesus *wished* as a man that His cup (death) could pass from Him (Matt. 26:39), but He *willed*, as

the Father willed, that it would take place for the salvation of the world. While His soul was “troubled” about death, He never prayed, “Father, save me from this hour.” He only asked, “shall I say” this? His answer was no, “for this purpose I came to this hour. ‘Father, glorify Your name’” (John 12:27-28). He never feared death as such, but banishment from the Father (Matt. 27:46). In fact, by His death Jesus overcame the power and fear of death, defeating the devil (Heb. 2:14).

### **HEBREWS 6:4-6 (cf. 10:26-31)—Does this passage teach that it is possible for Christians to lose their salvation?**

**PROBLEM:** Hebrews 6:4-6 seems to be written for Christians because it contains certain characteristics that would be true only of them, such as “partakers of the Holy Spirit” (v. 4). But it declares that if they fall away, it is impossible “to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame” (v. 6). Does this mean that Christians can lose their salvation?

**SOLUTION:** There are two basic interpretations of this passage. Some take it to refer to believers and others to nonbelievers.

Those who say this refers to unbelievers argue that all of these characteristics could belong to those who merely *profess* Christianity, but who do not really *possess* the Holy Spirit. They note that they are not depicted in the normal ways of describing a true Christian, such as, being “born again” (John 3:3), being “in Christ” (Eph. 1:3), or being “sealed by the Holy Spirit” (Eph. 4:30). They point to Judas Iscariot as a classic example. He walked with the Lord, was sent out and commissioned by Jesus on missions having “power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease” (Matt. 10:1). However, Jesus, in His prayer in John’s Gospel, spoke of Judas as “the son of perdition” (John 17:12).

There are several problems with taking this to refer to nonbelievers, even for those who hold that a believer can lose his salvation (i.e., Arminians). First, the passage declares emphatically that “it is impossible to renew them again to repentance” (Heb. 6:4, 6). But few Arminians believe that once a person has backslidden it is impossible for him to be saved again. Further, while the description of their spiritual status differs from other ways of expressing it in the New Testament, some of the phrases are very difficult to take any other way than that the person was saved. For example, (1) those spoken of had experienced “repentance” (Heb. 6:6), which is the condition of salvation (Acts 17:30); (2) they were “enlightened and have tasted the heavenly gift” (Heb. 6:4); (3) they were “partakers of the Holy Spirit” (v.4); (4) In addition, they had “tasted the good word of God” (v.5); and (5) have tasted the “powers of the age to come” (v. 5).

Of course, if they were believers, then the question arises as to their status after they had “fallen away” (v. 6). Here interpretations differ along theological lines. Arminians often argue that these people actually lost their salvation. However, the text seems to indicate that they cannot be saved again, something even most Arminians reject.

On the other hand, those who hold a Calvinistic point of view (such as the authors) point to several facts. First, the word for “fall away” (*parapesontas*) does not indicate a one-way action. Rather, it is the word for “drift,” indicating that the status of the individuals is not hopeless. Second, the fact is that it is “impossible” for them to repent again indicates the once-for-all nature of repentance. In other words, they don’t need to repent again since

they did it once and that is all that is necessary for “eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:12). Third, the text seems to indicate that there is no more need for “drifters” (backsliders) to repent again and get saved all over any more than there is for Christ to die again on the cross (Heb. 6:6). Finally, the writer of Hebrews calls those he is warning “beloved,” a term hardly appropriate for unbelievers.

In any event, there is no problem here with the *inspiration* of Scripture. It is simply an intramural question of *interpretation* of Scripture among Christians who share in common the belief that the Bible is the inspired Word of God in whatever it affirms.

### **HEBREWS 7:3—Does this verse support reincarnation?**

**PROBLEM:** Hebrews tells us that Melchizedek, “having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually.” Since Jesus assumed this priesthood (7:21), some reincarnationalists use this verse to prove that Jesus is a reincarnation of Melchizedek. Are they correct?

**SOLUTION:** No, this is a misuse of this passage. This is clear for several reasons. First of all, it says Melchizedek was only “made *like*” Jesus, not that Jesus was Melchizedek (Heb. 7:3). Second, Christ was only a priest “according to the order of” (Heb. 7:21) Melchizedek. It does not affirm that He was Melchizedek. Finally, the fact that Melchizedek had a mysterious and unrecorded birth and death (Heb. 7:3) does not prove reincarnation—it was merely used as an analogy for the eternal Messiah, Jesus Christ.