
HEBREWS

Holding on to the Prize

8:1—10:39

“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, . . .” (10:23).

When a church shows signs of sluggishness, it needs clear words of exhortation. It needs clear words of authority and a reminder of its obligation to pursue what it has already begun. We should not be surprised to find frequent, urgent demands in 10:19-39. The author says, “. . . let us draw near. . . . Let us hold fast . . . without wavering, . . . and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, . . .” The sermon must confront us with our failures and remind us of a duty to be done.

The demands of the author in verses 22, 23, 25, and 35 are spoken to a people who “have need of endurance” (10:36). They are in danger of “shrinking back” (10:39). An apathetic church needs to hear more than just the good news of God’s works. It needs to hear about God’s demands for “holding fast” (10:23), for good works, and for participation in the life of the church.

This is not the first section of Hebrews that calls us to be responsible. We have already seen words of appeal in Hebrews (2:1-4; 3:6, 14; 5:11—6:9). This book on renewal has accused (5:11-14), warned (2:1-4), and appealed (6:11) to the readers to maintain their commitment. One of the characteristic ways in which the author addresses his readers is with the words, “Let us. . . .” (4:1, 14, 16; 6:1; 12:28; 13:13). A sluggish church has to be confronted with its responsibility.

But words of appeal are never enough. A church can never survive on a barrage of demands alone. The demands mean nothing if we do not realize that we possess a gift worth preserving. Consequently, exhortation must always be accompanied with reminders of what the church has been given. This pattern is apparent in Hebrews, especially in 10:19-39. Encouragement always follows great affirmations about Jesus Christ. Thus the exhortation in 2:1-4 is based on the affirmation of chapter 1; the exhortation of 4:16 is based on God’s gift which is mentioned in 4:14, 15. In the same way, the exhortation in 10:19-39 comes at the end of a major section of Hebrews which began in chapter 5. The appeal is based on the account of Jesus as the great high priest.

Faith with no firm roots in God is not worth keeping. Thus before the author begins his demands (“Let us. . . . Let us. . . . Let us. . . .”) in 10:22-24, he summarized, “Since . . . we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus” (10:19). These words summarized what was said in 8:1—10:18. The references to the sanctuary, the blood of Jesus, and the “great high priest over the house of God” take us back to these chapters. Neither great affirmations nor demands can stand alone. The demand is based on the great work of Jesus Christ. What we “have” in 10:19 is our motivation for action. We may notice the author’s regular reminders of what we “have” in Jesus Christ (4:14, 15; 6:9; 8:1; 10:34; 13:10). That is, we have in Jesus Christ something too good to throw away.

TOO GOOD TO THROW AWAY

What will motivate us to remain faithful in the life of the church? Hebrews 10:19-21 mentions several items which are too important to throw away. There is, for instance, the fact that we have “confidence to enter the holy place” (10:19). This reminder refers to 8:1-6 where we learned that the high priestly work of Christ was done in the “true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man” (8:2). The high priests of the Old Testament went into the tabernacle each year to carry on their obligation (Leviticus 16). But their work was done in an earthly sanctuary. Hebrews 8:5 says the old sanctuary was only a “copy and shadow” of the real sanctuary. Therefore, it was inadequate, a fact which the Old Testament recognized (8:7).

Many interpreters believe the main point of Hebrews is the statement in 8:1. The author says, “Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens.” The Lord whom we worship is not limited by space and time. Other leaders are finite and temporary. But the Christian stands on solid ground, knowing that his Lord is not just a person who lived in the past. Our Lord’s work could not be stopped. He exalted to God’s right hand in the “real sanctuary.” When we speak of Jesus as the one who was exalted to God’s right hand, we acknowledge that no one else has a status like his.

The author affirms more often than any other New Testament writer that Jesus is at the right hand of God (1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12). There is a practical reason for this insistence. Weary readers doubted if their Christian pilgrimage was worthwhile because no goal was in sight. Thus the author stresses that Jesus has opened up the way and made the goal available. Earlier Jesus was described as the “pioneer” (2:10; RSV) and “forerunner” (6:20) who blazes the trail to the goal. In 10:19 the writer says, “. . . we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus.” Jesus is not the only one to appear before God in the sanctuary. According to 10:19, we may now enter with Him.

The good news, according to Hebrews, is that Jesus has done for us what neither we nor anyone else could have done. He gave us access to God and “confidence to enter” (10:19). The Greek word

for “confidence” in 4:16 and 10:35 does not describe a subjective feeling. It is the word for the authority or right to approach someone of high rank. Our “right” to approach God did not exist before the work of Christ. But He “opened for us” the “new and living way.” The illustration suggests an entry hall leading to the sanctuary which was closed, but now has been opened. The Greek word for “opened” (egkainizo) was normally used for the dedication of a new road or building. The way to God has been opened through the death of Christ. Without Him we would have no right to come before God.

THE GREAT SACRIFICE (8:8—10:18)

Hebrews 10:19 emphasizes that what Christ has done for us we could not have done for ourselves. Our access to God came “by the blood of Jesus” (10:19) and “through . . . His flesh” (10:20). This refers to the emphasis on sacrifice earlier in Hebrews. In 8:8-13, for instance, the author compared the two covenants and said that in the new covenant God will “remember their sins no more” (8:12). The covenant of Jesus Christ, far better than any other, releases us from our sins.

Chapter 9 includes a detailed account of the sacrifices of the old covenant. In the first covenant, sacrifices were annually offered for the sins of the people. The high priest took the blood of bulls and goats (9:7, 12, 13) and made an offering “for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance” (9:7). There was no remission of sins without the shedding of blood (9:22). But those priests and their sacrifices were not adequate (7:11). They did not succeed in purifying the conscience (9:14—10:1). And their repeated offering suggests that they were not effective (10:1-4). They only succeeded in reminding people of their sins (10:3). God is not satisfied with sacrifices and burnt offerings (10:8). No human activities could provide a release from guilt.

From this background, we are overwhelmed by the work of Christ. Instead of offering an ineffective sacrifice, He offered His own blood (9:11-14). Unlike the old sacrifices, His life and death did not need repeating (10:1-4, 11-18). At death He totally surrendered Himself to the will of the Father. Christ did for humanity what it could not do for itself. He gave the perfect obedience. By giving Himself, He made it possible for us to give ourselves.

Christians in danger of “shrinking back” (10:39) need to recognize what has been done for them. It may motivate them to endure. In Hebrews, the knowledge that Christ has done the perfect work of a high priest (8:1—10:21) provides the background for the exhortation: “Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (10:22). We “draw near” because Christ opened the way (10:19; 6:20). Our conscience was cleansed, not by our achievements, but by His perfect obedience. We have been cleansed because at baptism His cleansing work was offered to us. It is as if we were told, “Christ gave you a new start and opened the way. It is your obligation to draw near.” His sacrifice made available whatever “full assurance of faith” (10:22) we have.

For many of us, the idea of sacrifice is difficult to understand because we have never seen an animal sacrifice. We wonder if Hebrews 8—10 communicates anything to modern readers faced with problems of a different era. While the argument may sound strange to us, we must hear the message that Christ released us from the burden of an “evil conscience” (10:22). Even in our secularized society, we know about the problem of a bad conscience.

Thomas Harris wrote in *I’m OK—You’re OK* that we all feel, by the time we reach our adult years, that we are not “OK.” A particular offense may not disturb our conscience. We just may be aware that we are not all that we should be—as neighbors, parents, husbands, and wives. Because we believe we are not “OK,” we turn to the “high priests” of our society to make us whole. Today’s high priest may be the therapist to whom we turn for understanding and guidance. He may be a favorite author or opinion-maker. Like the readers of Hebrews, we understand what it means to have an “evil conscience” (10:22).

The New Testament, especially the book of Hebrews, proclaims that Jesus Christ, not the other high priests, cleanses the conscience and opens the way to God. According to 4:14, Christ is the sympathetic one who releases us from the burdens of the past. When you recognize that only He cleanses the conscience, you can go on.

There is an urgent message in the exhortations of 10:23-25. We recognize the problems of a sluggish congregation. Enthusiasm and active

participation in the life of the church have declined. But these demands summon the congregation to respond to God’s gift. Because He has opened the way, we now respond in the following ways. First, there is the demand to “hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end” (3:6). These weary Christians have been told repeatedly to “hold fast” (3:14; Gk., *katecho*, or “seize” in 6:18; RSV) what they have been given. It is as if the author had said, “Do you recall your original confession at baptism and the good news which you have accepted? You must now hold on to what has been made available. In fact, because God is ‘faithful’ (*pistos*, reliable), you now have a possession you may hold on to *without wavering*.” If God is reliable, we are also to be reliable or “unwavering.”

Also, the fact that we have been given a precious gift leads us to “consider how to stimulate one another with love and good deeds” (10:24). Because of Christ we turn our attention to an enthusiasm for the community of Christians. We have a responsibility to stimulate others to action. The Greek word for “stimulate” or “stir up” (RSV) is *paroxysmos*, from which we get the word “paroxysm.” The word suggests our responsibility to provoke or “stir up” the community. In a very real sense, the enthusiasm of the church depends on our being agents for provoking others. The renewal of the church cannot happen without people who are motivated by God’s gift to “stir up” others.

Much of the “stirring up” takes place when we meet together in worship (10:25). One of the signs of the decline of the community to which Hebrews was written was the smaller attendance at worship. Perhaps some had learned a “habit” of neglecting the assembly because of a lack of interest. But no church can recapture its enthusiasm without taking public worship seriously. These meetings are the occasions for “encouraging one another.”

We should be concerned about the vitality of any congregation which takes public worship lightly. Religion cannot be reduced to the mechanical repetition of certain activities, as some have done. Obviously, Christians do good works outside these assemblies. But we cannot deny that the health of the church is reflected in the collective attitude toward church attendance. Here we “stir up” and encourage one another.

FALLING INTO THE HANDS OF THE LIVING GOD (10:26-31)

The sluggishness of a community means that we take for granted God's great gift in Jesus Christ. Words describing God's gifts begin to mean nothing to us when they are so familiar that they are like an old song. Thus we read without enthusiasm that we have become "partakers of a heavenly calling" (3:1) or that we "have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus" (10:19). We take for granted these gifts and become bored with them. Like one great German writer, we may only say, "God will forgive me; that is His business."

Because Christians easily take these words of God's grace for granted, there is a place for a word of warning. Hebrews tells the good news of the sacrifice of Christ, and it also warns us that we cannot trifle with God. The author asks, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (2:3).

In 10:26-31, the author again warns his readers to discourage them from apostasy. This passage is one of three ominous warnings in the epistle about the impossibility of repentance for those who commit apostasy (6:4-6; 12:16, 17). These words are among the most difficult in Hebrews for us to understand. Interpreters disagree on this passage. But while there is disagreement among scholars about the full meaning of the words, this much is certain: We are told that we cannot trifle with God. "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31). Or, as the author says later, "Our God is a consuming fire" (12:29). We cannot fall away assuming that "God will forgive me; that is His business." Jesus Christ was crucified only once. At our conversion we received the benefits of His sacrifice. If we deliberately fall away, "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins" (10:26).

Why these stern words? The author knows what it means to fall away. He has told us about the precious gifts of Jesus Christ, gifts which consist of new life and hope. To throw all of this away would be to recrucify the Son of God (6:6). In 10:29 the author uses equally strong language. A deliberate apostasy would be an insult, a profaning of what is holy! It would mean "trampling" (*katapateo*) the Son of God and profaning His blood. When we recognize the greatness of the sacrifice of Christ (7:1—10:18), we understand why the stern warning appears in 10:26-31.

Apostasy is an insult to all that God has done.

We must recognize that these words were not addressed to people who had already left the faith. The author does not raise the problem of people who wish to return to God after their apostasy. The words were to warn people who were considering apostasy. These people were reminded that God is a God of judgment and grace.

We also are tempted to fall away after hearing an old and worn message. Therefore, the church needs to hear not only the good news of Christ's sacrifice. There is a place for a word of judgment and a reminder that apostasy is the supreme insult to God's goodness.

LOOKING FORWARD (10:32-39)

If Hebrews is a model sermon, we notice that preaching contains both the good news of God's grace and the word of judgment that we dare not "trample" this grace. Hebrews 10:19-31 contains both the word of grace and the word of judgment. But before the author concludes his exhortation, there is one more feature to examine in 10:32-39.

"You have need of endurance," he tells his weary community (10:36); "Do not throw away your confidence" (10:35); "But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction" (10:39). Earlier he appealed to this faltering community by reminding them of the enormity of God's gift (10:19, 20) and the reality of His judgment (10:26-31). In 10:32-39, he makes one more appeal.

What can keep the church from throwing away its precious possession? In 10:32-39, he reminds his audience of the promise of God that will make the pilgrimage worthwhile. "Do not throw away your confidence, *which has a great reward*. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may *receive what was promised*" (10:35, 36; emphasis mine).

The author even encourages his readers to endure by recalling what they have endured already. In the early days these Christians had "endured a great conflict of sufferings" (10:32). Some had been imprisoned, abused, and robbed of their possessions (10:32, 33). But they endured all of this because they knew that they had a different kind of possession, one which would abide forever (10:34). The one possession which gave them power to endure was the one that no

one could take from them.

It is no accident that a book addressed to weary Christians contains a significant number of references to God's reward or promise. The Christian is in the position of Moses, who also endured pain because he anticipated a reward (11:26). Faith always involves a trust in God's reward (11:6). The Christian imitates others who have lived in faith because they believed in God's promise (6:20).

In our time of boredom with a story we have heard before, we need a "memory of better days." We should recall the hope which helped us overcome obstacles and endure either abuse or pain. We endured in the past because we knew that we were not struggling for a lost cause. Even when we are momentarily weary of our responsibilities and there are no immediate victories, hope

helps us survive.

At first, this major section of Hebrews (8:1—10:39) may appear hard to understand to the modern reader. Its references to old customs may appear to say little to us as we struggle with the task of being a Christian. But if we notice the exhortation that comes at the end (10:19-39), we recognize that the author appeals to his readers to remain faithful by describing the greatness of what has been done for them by the sacrifice of Christ. The Christian is not only sustained by this great sacrifice. He lives also with the recognition of the tragedy of "trampling" this gift. He knows that this gift is only the beginning of God's promises. The Christian has a possession far too precious to throw away.

—James Thompson

Applying Scripture to Life

A Blessing or a Curse

In James Barrie's play, "The Will," a lovely young couple visited their attorney one day in London. The husband was beginning to prosper, and his wife was eager that he make a will. She wanted him to leave a part of his small fortune to certain charities in which they were both interested. Then he had two sweet maiden aunts who were dependent on him. These, too, must be provided for. Both husband and wife were so beautifully unselfish in their attitude that the gloomy office of the solicitor seemed to take on a new radiance. When they were gone, the lawyer felt as if springtime had paid him a visit.

Ten years slipped by, and this husband and wife again came in the lawyer's office. The husband had continued to prosper during the ten years. He was far richer than he used to be. In consequence, his wife

had become more vain and self-centered. She also gained in wealth till now she seemed not so much dressed as upholstered. This time she came with a different purpose from the one that first brought her. To use her own words, she came to see that her husband did not do anything foolish. By this she meant that she had come to see that her husband did not give a penny of his money away. Nothing was to be left to the orphanage—it would only encourage the children to grow up useless. Nothing was to be left to the old aunts—they were parasites anyway. When the couple had gone this time, the solicitor felt as if he has been nipped by a killing frost.

Other years slipped by, and there is a final scene. The husband is again in the office of his solicitor, this time alone. He is far richer now than ever. Everything that he has touched has turned to gold. But there is no tenderness in his face, and

no gladness looks out from his tired eyes. He glares at his solicitor, and spits out these tragic words: "My wife is dead; my son is a rotter; my daughter has run away with the chauffeur. Take this paper. It has the names of the men with whom I have sought most furiously for gold. Leave my money to them with my respectful curses." In the eyes of the world, this man had won. The victory was his. But it was a victory that was shot through with tragic defeat.

Limited by Our View

W. E. Sangster told the story of a little girl who came home from school with the proud announcement that she had learned the multiplication tables, even 12 times 12. Her grandfather mischievously asked her, "What's 13 times 13?" She replied, "Don't be silly, Grandpa. There is no such thing."