

Hebrews 10, Part 2

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In our study of Hebrews, we have now finally reached the point where we emerge from the doctrinal wilderness that stretches from Hebrews 7 halfway through Hebrews 10. This is one of the most abstract sections of the New Testament. The only other section that I can think of that is as doctrinally dense is the one that runs from Romans 9 through Romans 11, and even that one doesn't deal with topics as central to Christianity as the ones we've uncovered in our study of Hebrews. God clearly wants every Christian to know the logic underlying everything from the Law of Moses to the crucifixion of Jesus, and it's worth our time to study, but it's about what Christ has already done, not what we have yet to do. This fascinates abstract thinkers like my father, but it may leave the rest of us wondering what the point is.

Thankfully, the Hebrews writer hasn't forgotten our need for a take-home message. He needed to spend a lot of the time elaborating on the doctrine that should motivate us, but now that he's done with the doctrine, he's ready to tell us what we should do about it. Of course, this message was originally addressed to first-century Christians, but despite the differences in situation between ours and theirs, it is still every bit as applicable to us today.

In many ways, these early brethren were in a difficult position. They had been rejected by their Jewish relatives and countrymen, and their faith in Christ had led them to be persecuted. They could expect to be stripped of their property or even imprisoned by those who wanted to crush the disciples of Jesus. Naturally, this was making some of them a little skittish. Commitment to Jesus had become expensive, and many of them were inching away from it. As understandable as this attitude may be to us, the Hebrews writer had little sympathy for it. He encourages them, and by extension encourages us, to remain true to Christ regardless of circumstance. Let's read this in Hebrews 10, Part 2.

The So-What

The Hebrews writer begins this discussion by reviewing what we have just learned in the past several chapters and pointing out what that understanding should logically lead us to do. He lays this argument out in Hebrews 10:19-25. The review session in this part contains two main elements. First, the writer reminds us why it is that we have the right to approach the presence of God at all. Like the high priests of old, we come with blood, but the blood that sanctifies us is the blood of Jesus. Nor do we have to part the veil of purity that stands between us and God. Instead, when Jesus offered His body as a sacrifice, His death opened a way through the curtain. That's why when Jesus died, the veil of the temple in Jerusalem was torn in two from top to bottom. It signified that the way to God was now open to all. Second, once we get there, we don't have to worry that God won't hear what we have to say, because Jesus will intercede.

All that's left for us is to take advantage of the opportunity. Jesus can open the way, but He won't make us use it. That decision is up to us, but we can make it fully assured that Jesus is going to perform what He has promised. He cleanses our souls with His blood, and He washes our bodies in the pure waters of baptism. All of this amounts to a complete spiritual purification, and once we have carried it out, we can be certain that we have the right to draw near.

Our initial sanctification, though, is only beneficial to us if we remain true to our commitment to God. Jesus will be faithful to us. He has promised that every tribulation we undergo for His sake in this life is going to be repaid a hundredfold in heaven. It's like this: Whenever I pick a new bank, I always check to make sure that they have that little image on the website or sticker on the door that says they are members of the FDIC. That gives me confidence to deposit my money in the bank, because I know the money is insured and that I'll get it back. The faithfulness of Jesus is spiritual insurance. It guarantees that whatever we invest in Him He is going to keep safe forever.

Because it is so important to remain true to Jesus, we have a responsibility not just to ourselves, but to one another. As the Hebrews writer presents this, our responsibility has two parts. First of all, we have to think about ways that we can encourage other Christians. We need to be thinking about who needs a spiritual pick-me-up and how we can get that done. Second, we carry out this responsibility when we assemble together. A lot of the time, when we cite Hebrews 10:25, we look at it in terms of our obligation to God. God expects me to go to church, so I need to go to church. That's true, but it's not really what the passage is talking about. This is talking about the way we encourage one another simply by showing up. I know that every Sunday there are people I look for. When they're there, I go home with a spring in my step, because I feel like the church is headed in the right direction, but when they aren't, and our numbers are down a little bit, I start wondering where they are, what's wrong, and whether the congregation actually is doing well. God expect us to grow beyond just showing up, but even if we are just showing up, we're making a valuable contribution.

Sinning Willfully.

That's what we do as Christians whenever things are going well, but when we're going backward spiritually, we're headed toward a terrible place. The Hebrews writer discusses the problem in Hebrews 10:26-31. This is definitely one of

the scary passages, not just in the book of Hebrews, but in the entire Bible. It could not be clearer about the consequences if we know God but choose to reject Him. Once we abandon Jesus, there is no hope, and all we have to look forward to is a divine inquisition on the day of judgment and the torments of hell after it is finished.

The Hebrews writer then describes what the trial of the unfaithful Christian will be like. In our criminal justice system, when a man is charged with a crime, the prosecution will call witnesses to testify to his guilt. The same thing was true under the law of Moses, but under its rules, the defendant could not be convicted unless two or three witnesses spoke against him. Here, we learn what three witnesses will testify against the disciple who has fallen away. Jesus will take the stand and say, "You knowingly rejected me." He will be followed by the blood of the covenant, which will say, "I sanctified you, but you treated me like an unclean thing." Finally, the Spirit of grace will testify, "You insulted me." On the testimony of those three witnesses, the willful sinner will be found guilty, he will have no excuse, and he will be handed over to God for punishment. Remember, God made the wrenching decision to send His only Son to earth to suffer and die for us. How do you think He would feel about it if we take that priceless sacrifice and treat it like dirt? What a slap in the face for the One who loves us so much! It would certainly guarantee that He would unleash His unstoppable wrath on us. When I think of almighty God taking me into His hands to destroy me, it chills me to the bone.

That horrifying, hair-raising judgment is what a lot of Christians are fooling with as they drift away from God. What a tragedy! What a waste! That's not a fate I would wish on my worst enemy, and yet there are people in this congregation, people whom I love, who are placing their souls in terrible danger without even thinking about it. This calls us to two main responses. First, we must keep watch over ourselves. We must be honest about where we are spiritually and how we're growing. We need to make sure that we are more devoted disciples than we were a year ago, or five years ago, because if God isn't daily controlling more and more of our lives, we can be sure that the devil is. Second, we need to do whatever we can do to reach out to our brothers and sisters in such deadly peril. They need to hear from us how much we love them and how foolish the choice is that they're making. The older I get, the less I look forward to telling others unpleasant truths, but we need to have the courage to tell that truth anyway, lest souls be lost if we do not.

Endurance.

The terrible consequences of failure are why endurance is so important to the Christian. The Hebrews writer begins his consideration of this topic in Hebrews 10:32-39. The first part of this context gives us some thought-provoking insight into the lives of first-century Christians. Note that the writer says that these are things that have already happened to his audience. They were publicly humiliated and mistreated because of their faith in Christ. I would imagine that this involved the sort of public beatings that the apostle Paul experienced all too frequently. They saw other Christians imprisoned, and they risked their own lives by caring for the prisoners. They saw their property confiscated, for no better reason than that Christians could not expect the protection of the laws. All of these things, the writer says, they accepted with joy because of their hope of eternal reward in heaven. These were tests that they had already passed.

I don't think the Christians who endured that level of suffering would be too impressed with the things that we so often stumble over today. In fact, I think they would probably laugh at the problems that we take so seriously. Lauren and I have a non-Christian friend whom we've tried to get to come to services with us, and her big excuse is that she can't trust her kids to behave. They'll throw a fit, and she won't be able to get them under control, and it would be so embarrassing, and she can't face the thought of doing that. She is so fixated on the thought of making a scene that she won't even think about the larger consequences for herself and her family of the decision she's making.

Nor are Christians immune to this sort of excuse-making. How many times have I heard brethren say that they can't make it to services because they're so worn out after work, or their kids have all these activities that demand so much of their time, or they have all these other things to do that are so much more important than Wednesday night services. Frankly, that all boils down to want-to. Christians who want to be here will find a way. Christians who don't want to be here will find an excuse. If we only care about keeping the elders off our backs, we're not worthy of the name of Christ.

That may sound like a hard line to take, but it's no harder than the line that Hebrews takes. Even though he's writing to people who have endured so much already, he's not cutting them any slack. Sure, he's sympathetic, but he makes it quite clear to them that they haven't punched their tickets to heaven yet, that if they shrink back for any reason, it will cost them their souls. It's morbidly fascinating to think about just what these Christians were about to face. After all, if they'd sailed through some pretty serious persecution already, what are they facing now that has them questioning their commitment? From some things that Hebrews says elsewhere, my suspicion is that the authorities were about to put away the whip and take out the sword. However, even the threat of death was no reason to slack in their service.

We must also recognize, friends, that there is literally nothing that can justify our turning away from God. There is nothing that can justify our giving Him a lukewarm version of devotion. Christ gave everything He had for us. He expects us to give everything we have for Him. Sometimes, this is going to be difficult, and Christ certainly understands what it's like to be tempted by suffering, but that doesn't change the bottom line. Either we are faithful, or we aren't.