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ENDURING FAITH

Hebrews 10:32-39

By

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August 22, 2004

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Hebrews Lesson 31

Enduring Faith Hebrews 10:32-39

Our text exhorts us to have enduring faith in times of persecution. It is a difficult topic to speak about because probably none of us have ever experienced what could legitimately be called “persecution” for our faith. Sure, most of us have faced instances of reproach or rejection when people discovered that we believe in Christ. I’ve had people say false things about me and slander me. Occasionally, people have tried to get me removed from my position as pastor.

But I’ve never been beaten, tortured, or thrown in prison because of my faith. I’ve never had my property confiscated or my family torn away from me because I confess Christ as Lord. That probably is true of most of you, too. A pastor who had suffered *real* persecution could deliver a more credible message than I can.

Another reason that it’s difficult to speak on this text is that American Christians for many years have bought into a false view of the Christian life that emphasizes the benefits of the faith *in this life*. We’re told, “God offers an abundant plan for your life. Trust in Jesus and He will help you overcome all of your problems and enjoy life to the fullest!” Jesus is marketed as the solution to everything from weight loss to success in business to having a happy marriage. The sales pitch is that receiving Christ will bring you the greatest happiness in this life.

Somehow, getting persecuted and losing your material possessions and maybe your life don’t harmonize with that message! Most of us signed up for the prosperity plan, not for the persecution plan! If we encounter difficult trials, we get angry at God and maybe even decide, “If that’s the way He’s going to treat me, I’m not going to follow Him! Hardship, persecution, and suffering aren’t in the deal that I signed up for!”

How could we have strayed so far from the biblical picture of the Christian life? It is often referred to as a fight or war (Eph. 6:10-20; 2 Tim. 2:3; 4:7), neither of which are pleasant. Many pas-

sages tell us to expect trials and hardship (John 16:33; 2 Tim. 1:8; 1 Pet. 4:12). The abundant life that Jesus promised has nothing to do with a trouble-free life, but rather with having His joy in the midst of tribulation. He stated plainly the requirements for following Him: Deny yourself and take up your cross daily (Luke 9:23). A cross was not a slightly irritating circumstance; it was an instrument of slow, tortuous death!

Our text comes on the heels of the strong warning against apostasy (10:26-31). Following the same pattern as in the strong warning of 6:4-8, the author assumes the best about his readers. He encourages them by saying that he knows they are not going to turn away from Christ, but rather that they will endure in faith, in spite of whatever hardships they may suffer. The author shows how to have a faith that endures any kind of trial, but especially, persecution. If you're going to make it as a Christian, you must learn to apply what he says here about enduring faith:

To have faith that endures trials, remember how God worked
in the past, focus on doing His will in the present,
and look to His promises in the future.

Before we work through the text, one other word of introduction may be helpful. Jesus' parable of the sower (Matt. 13:3-23; Mark 4:3-20; Luke 8:5-15) serves as a useful backdrop to our text. Jesus described the seed of the Word as sown on four types of soil. Some fell beside the road, where the birds ate it, so that it never took root and sprouted. This represents unbelievers who hear the gospel, but do not understand or believe it. Other seed fell on the rocky ground, where there was no depth of soil. It quickly sprang up, but it had no roots, and so it withered. This represents those who hear the Word and immediately receive it with joy. But when affliction or persecution arises, they quickly fall away.

The third soil is infested with thorns. The seed sprouts, but the thorns, representing worries, riches, and pleasures of this life (Luke 8:14), choke out the word so that it does not bring forth any fruit. The fourth type is good soil, representing those who hear, understand, and accept the Word, and bear fruit with perseverance (Luke 8:15).

In my understanding, *only* the fourth type of soil represents true believers who “have faith to the preserving of the soul” (Heb. 10:39). The rocky soil and the thorny soil both make a profession of faith for a while but eventually, they “shrink back to destruction.” In other words, genuine saving faith endures trials and bears fruit. The amount of fruit will vary (“some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty,” Matt. 13:23), but there will be observable evidence of a transformed heart. True believers may fail under pressure, as Peter did when he denied Jesus. Every believer struggles daily against sin, not always victoriously. But if God has changed the heart and if His saving life is “in the vine,” the person will repent, endure in faith, and bear fruit unto eternal life.

1. To have enduring faith in trials, remember how God worked in the past (10:32-34).

“The former days” refers to the time just after these Hebrew Christians had been saved. The author draws their minds back to how God had worked in their lives during that time, in spite of some very difficult circumstances. His point is, “You did well then, so you can hang in there now and in the future if persecution hits.” He reminds them of three things that were true of them as new converts, which also are true of all believers:

- A. Remember how God enlightened you with a new, godly understanding of life.

Unbelievers are described in Scripture as being spiritually blind, unable to “see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.” Only God can command the light to shine out of darkness. He “shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4, 6). Before God opened our eyes, we did not even see our need for the Savior. We mistakenly thought that we were good enough to get into heaven by our own righteousness. We had no idea of how terrible our sins were or of how holy God is. We did not appreciate the fact that the Son of God gave Himself on the cross to pay our debt of sin. But then, while we were yet in such darkness, God graciously opened our eyes. With the converted slave trader, John Newton, we could sing, “I once was blind, but now I see!”

I remind you, however, that the apostates had experienced some degree of enlightenment, and yet they were not truly saved (6:4). It is possible to have a fair amount of theological understanding, and yet be lost! Some men have devoted their lives to studying the Bible and writing scholarly books. But these scholars have never repented of their sins and put their trust in Christ as Savior. They are “enlightened,” but headed for eternal destruction.

B. Remember your newfound joy in the faith, no matter what your circumstances.

Coming to Christ is like falling in love. The Lord rebukes the church at Ephesus for losing their first love. He tells them to remember from where they had fallen and repent (Rev. 2:4, 5). These Hebrew Christians had known the same exuberance when they had first come to faith in Christ.

Not long into the process, they encountered some difficult trials. The author calls it “a great conflict of sufferings.” Our word “athletic” comes from the Greek word translated “conflict.” It was like a hard-fought athletic contest, with Satan vying for their souls. Some of them were “made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations.” We get our word “theater” from the Greek word for “public spectacle.” As you know, when someone from a strong Jewish family embraces Jesus as the Messiah, he often is made a spectacle—ridiculed and rejected by all of his friends and family.

Some of these Hebrew Christians had been imprisoned. Those who remained free showed sympathy to the prisoners and publicly identified themselves in solidarity with them. They probably visited them and brought them food and clothing, since the jails in that time did not supply such things. Some of them lost their property, either by corrupt officials taking it or by mobs stealing everything of value and then destroying their houses.

But the significant word in verse 34 is *joyfully!* They didn't just grimly endure the loss of their property; they accepted it *joyfully!* Many modern Christians would rage at such unfair treatment and file a lawsuit to recover what they lost, plus damages for emotional suffering! But these new believers had such profound joy in knowing Christ that they sang the doxology as the mob hauled off

their belongings and leveled their houses. They were not rocky-ground or thorny-ground believers!

C. Remember how your values and focus in life radically shifted.

These verses reveal four ways that these new believers had experienced a radical shift in their values and focus. If you think back to your conversion, you should be able to identify with them.

1) There was a change in your priorities and values from the temporal to the eternal.

The only way that they could joyfully accept the seizure of their property was, they knew that they had “a better possession and a lasting one.” They had “treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal” (Matt. 6:20). They knew that Jesus had gone to prepare a place for them to dwell with Him forever and that He was coming again to take them to be with Him there (John 14:2-3). So while, no doubt, it was hard to lose their earthly possessions, their focus had shifted from the temporal to the eternal.

In 1986, I was preaching through 1 Corinthians and came to 15:19, where Paul caps his argument for the resurrection with these startling words: “If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.” That verse jarred me. I asked myself, “Can I *really* say that?” Being a Christian provides me with a good life. I have a wonderful wife and children. I get paid to study and teach God’s Word. I have brothers and sisters worldwide. I know that my sins are forgiven. And, heaven is thrown in as a bonus after this life is over! Such a deal!”

But Paul says, “If there is no heaven, if this life is all there is, being a Christian is ludicrous!” Why suffer ridicule? Why give your money away? Why spend this short life serving the Lord? Why deny yourself the pleasures of sin? Why bother living for anyone other than yourself? Better to eat and drink today, for tomorrow you may die. But, a Christian knows that this life is *not* all there is. Christians have shifted their priorities and values from the temporal to the eternal.

2) There was a change from valuing what others think of you to valuing more what God thinks of you.

These new believers suffered “by being made a public spectacle through reproaches.” Why put up with that? Why not just blend in with the crowd? Why not laugh at the same dirty jokes? Why not be one of the guys? Because their new focus was not on pleasing people, but God, who examines the heart (1 Thess. 2:4; Heb. 10:38, “no pleasure”). Worldly people live for the acclaim of others. They want people to like them, and so their focus is on making a good impression. But those who have been rescued from sin by the crucified and risen Savior live to please Him.

- 3) There was a change from putting self first to putting God and others ahead of self.

Every unbeliever lives for himself or herself. We are innately self-centered. If helping someone will get us some advantage, we'll do it. But our overall aim in life is to be happy and get ahead, even if it means stepping on others at times.

But a Christian focuses on loving God and others (the two great commandments). Christians take their focus off of self and consider the needs of others (the Golden Rule). So these Hebrew believers had showed sympathy for the prisoners. They were willing to share in the sufferings of those who were mistreated.

- 4) There was a change from demanding that God be “fair” to submitting to His sovereign will.

Unbelievers want God to treat them “fairly,” as they think they deserve to be treated. They don't understand that if God gave them what they deserve, they would go straight to hell! When a tragedy strikes them, they rail against God and complain, “This isn't fair! I don't deserve to be treated in this way!”

Notice that some of the new Hebrew believers were thrown in prison, but some were not. God has different purposes for His people with regard to persecution and suffering. We have no right to question His wisdom or justice if He chooses to send trials our way, while other believers escape such trials. If we are the ones who are not in the hospital or in prison for our faith, then we ought to visit those who are there and show them compassion (13:3). If trials come our way, we should submit to God's dealings, trusting Him to work all things together for our good.

So the first way to have enduring faith in times of trial is, remember how God worked in your life in the past. Remember how He saved you and opened your eyes to the truth. Remember your new joy in knowing Christ. Remember how faithful He was to bring you through trials. Remember how He turned your life around. Remembering these things will help you endure by faith in the present time of trials.

2. To have enduring faith in trials, focus on confidently doing God's will in the present (10:35-36).

The author gives two aspects of this:

- A. To do God's will in the present, don't throw away your confidence in Christ (10:35).

He is *not* talking about confidence in *yourself*, but confidence in *Christ*. I have heard many Christians say, "You've got to believe in yourself!" That is a worldly idea, but not a biblical one! Our confidence is in God (2 Cor. 3:5). This is the fourth (and last) time that the author uses this word. In 3:6, he exhorted us to "hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end." In 4:16, he encouraged us to "draw near with confidence to the throne of grace." In 10:19, he reminds us again that "we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus." Clearly, our confidence is in Jesus Christ and His shed blood, not in anything in us. It refers to maintaining and testifying to a settled assurance of the truth of the gospel in the face of persecution or trials.

Such confidence is at the core of saving faith, and thus it has a great reward, namely, heaven and eternal glory with Christ. The "great reward" of 10:35 is synonymous with "the promise" of 10:36. Both refer to God's promise of eternal life.

- B. To do God's will in the present, persevere in obedience, especially when you are tempted to compromise under pressure (10:36).

The author further explains, "For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise." God's will refers to His moral commandments and priorities as revealed in His Word. Under the pressure of trials, it is easy to justify moral compromise. In 10:7-9, the author cited Psalm 40 to show that Jesus came to do the Father's will, namely, the

cross. It was not easy! Satan tempted Jesus to dodge it: “Just worship me and I’ll give you all the kingdoms of this world” (Matt. 4:8-9; see also 16:21-23). “No need to suffer and die as the sin-bearer!” But Jesus resisted all compromise and steadfastly obeyed God’s will, even when it meant a horrible death. We should also endure in obeying God, even if it means suffering or persecution. After you have suffered, you will receive God’s promise of salvation. This last phrase of verse 36 points toward the future:

3. To have enduring faith in trials, look to God’s promises for the future (10:37-39).

The author combines a quote from Isaiah 26:20-21 with another from the LXX of Habakkuk 2:4, inverting the order of the Habakkuk quote to suit his purpose here. The Hebrew of this verse is translated, “Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith.” The difference between the Hebrew and the Greek may be due to a now unknown Hebrew variant, or the Greek translators may have rendered an interpretive paraphrase. Philip Hughes explains, “The discrepancy between ‘he shrinks back’ here and ‘he is puffed up’ in the Hebrew of Habakkuk 2:4 is not fundamental, for the man who *shrinks back* is precisely the man who is puffed up with self-sufficiency and is therefore blind to the need of trustful and patient endurance” (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 436).

The author is repeating here for emphasis the same concepts that he has already stated or implied.

- A. Get God’s perspective on time and eternity (10:37).

“For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay.” The “very little while” is from God’s perspective of time, not from our perspective! The original quote in Isaiah was written to the people of Judah who were being threatened by hostile enemies. God is encouraging them to hold on for a little while, until He delivers them and judges their enemy. The point is, this present life is “a very little while” in comparison with the eternal joys of heaven. That is why Paul could call his many trials “momentary, light affliction” which was producing “an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17). To have enduring faith in trials now, get God’s eternal perspective.

B. Live by faith every day (10:38).

The Christian life is not a 100-yard dash; it's a marathon. God's righteous ones (the ones He declares righteous through faith in Christ; Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11) live by faith. Saving faith is not a one-time action, but an ongoing, daily matter of trusting in God's promise of salvation in Christ. Peter reminded suffering Christians of their inheritance, "reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God *through faith* for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet. 1:4, 5, italics added).

I meet many Christians who live by their feelings, not by faith in Christ. We are to walk with Christ just as we received Him, by grace through faith (Col. 1:6; Eph. 2:8-9). Our aim should be to please Him, as the author will go on to say: "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (11:6). Not to trust God is to call Him a liar and to question His integrity. Genuine faith perseveres through difficult trials. False believers shrink back to destruction.

C. Let eternal reality govern your present way of life (10:39).

The author expresses his confidence that his readers, with him, "are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving [lit., obtaining] of the soul." He is saying, "Let God's threat of eternal damnation and your faith in His promise of eternal life govern the way you live." We should live in such a manner that if God's promises about heaven are not true, we are fools to live as we do. Paul said, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, pity us! But if there is a heaven and a hell, living by faith in God's promises is the only way to go.

Conclusion

Spend your time, your money, and your very life as if God's promises in the gospel are true. Remember how God worked in your life in the past, when you first came to faith in Christ. Live in that same way now, because you know that in Christ you have a better and lasting possession than you ever had on earth. Focus on doing God's will in the present, especially when trials tempt you to compromise. Look to God's promises for the future. Live with enduring faith in God and He will sustain you through every trial.

Discussion Questions

1. Some Christians did not have a dramatic conversion experience. How can they apply the first point?
2. Has the American church put too much emphasis on the present benefits of the gospel and not enough on the eternal benefits? How does this affect our view of suffering?
3. Some counselors advise Christians to express their anger at God when they think He has treated them unfairly. Is this wise counsel? Why/why not?
4. How would your life be different if you lived with an eternal focus? What needs to be changed in light of the reality of heaven?

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