

Hebrews 10-13: The Life of Faith

Let us go on a little further in Hebrews. We have covered all of the book up to Hebrews 10:18; I wanted to take you to 10:18 because that is really the breaking point in the book of Hebrews. That's where the great change takes place: from exposition about Jesus as our great high priest to meditations on Jesus' high priestly ministry. It is also true that at this time the author will begin to turn our attention toward the character of the faith that allows us to appropriate the benefits of that ministry. This faith has already been mentioned, and it will become ever more prominent as we go further into the book.

Hebrews 10:19-39 is another warning section. It is actually very similar to the warning section in chapters 5:11-6:10. There are four basic things that are found in both places. First of all, there is an exhortation to apply the theology that has just been presented to the present situation. That is in verses 19 through 24. Second, there is a warning against deliberate sin in verse 25 through about 31. This section is similar to the warning against deliberate sin in chapter 6:4-8 and the language is extremely sharp. We will not go through it, because we have already covered it when we discussed chapter 6, but this is extremely strong language in chapter 10. It essentially says that if you do not draw near to God in fellowship, you will still have to deal with Him. If you do not fall down on your knees in praise, you will fall down on your knees in terror, because you cannot escape God. One way or another, you will have to reckon with Him. You will have to stand before Him, but if you deliberately refuse to come near after professing Him and you persist in that, there will be no sacrifice for you.

Thirdly, in the next section, verses 32 to 34, just as before, he encourages them again. He says, "Now I really do expect better things of you." He says, "I know how you handled the first crisis. In the first crisis, you gladly suffered confiscation of your property and you identified with those who were in prison and so I am confident the same thing will happen again." One person put it this way: "Remember the bad old days, the first time when you thought things were really difficult and how God carried you through and you were faithful. Well, the bad old days are going to be back again and you will make it just like you did last time." The point, of course, is that a lot of times we learn most about God and about loving and serving God when things are difficult. Precisely when it is hardest to obey or hardest to remain loyal, then when we do obey and remain loyal, that confirms us. If someone offers an easy way to do something wrong or to step away from fellowship with God and we resist, that makes us stronger.

Then finally, in chapter 10:35-39, there is an appeal to persevere, to show faith and to reap the blessings. What I would like to focus on primarily is that first section, verses 19-25. He tells us here very plainly that he wants us to meditate on and to apply what he is saying here. I will read from verses 19-25. Notice how the phrase "let us" occurs repeatedly in these verses:

Therefore brothers, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus ... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled from a guilty conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly the hope we professed Let us consider how to spur one another on towards love and good deeds Let us not give up meeting together.

He is saying that we must meditate on the consequences of this sacrifice that God has given us. The sacrifice has ended the barrier on God's side, but now that we have a clean conscience, there is also removal of the barrier on our side. Jesus offered the sacrifice, but He also cleansed us, and so now the time has come to draw near to God, to enjoy His fellowship, and to enjoy His blessing. The time is here, verse 24, to encourage one another, to spur one another on toward love and good deeds, to live joyfully in our corporate life, and to have the fullness of Christian virtue as it comes in fellowship. You cannot

live alone. You will never have all that you need, you will never have sufficiency in yourself, so join together. Spur one another on. This is your privilege as Christians: to come into God's presence together.

Then he gives a negative "let us," in verse 25, saying, "let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing." I have to give a little aside here on "let us not give up meeting together." The way in which this Bible verse, 10:25, is commonly used is to tell people to get to church. "Go to church, don't forsake meeting together." I am all in favor of going to church, but this passage, as we saw last time, is not really about the importance of church attendance. It is certainly true that church attendance is important, but what this is really talking about is forsaking the assembly. Erratic attendance is bad, but that is not the topic here. The topic here is forsaking the assembly, and there are two ways that could happen. One way that it happened back then—and this can happen today, too—is that people say, "I don't want to be identified as a Christian. If I don't go to church, if I don't associate with Christians, then I will be free from persecution. Maybe the persecutors will not know that I am a believer." In this way, then, to refuse to go to church was to say, "I do not have a part in the fellowship of the body of Christ." It might mean going back to Judaism, or it might mean simply saying, "I am going to be inconspicuous. I just want to be a private secret Christian and hide out." Today, at least in the United States, people do not exactly forsake the assembly in that way.

I do want to say a little word about people who almost never go to church and the way that relates to para-church ministries. I am not opposed to para-church ministries—in fact, you might notice that the cup I am drinking my water from tonight says "Young Life." I am completely in favor of Young Life, Reformed University Ministries, Campus Crusade, Intervarsity, and Fellowship of Christian Athletes. All those things are wonderful, but they can become a kind of substitute church for many people. Some organizations fight very hard to avoid that, and others do not really care, but the truth is that if people are saved and come to know the Lord at a Wednesday night meeting, but then they never learn to become a part of a local church, it can have a harmful effect. If you are a part of a para-church ministry, I would urge you to labor mightily to connect people with the local church.

There are other reasons why people do not attend church as well: love of travel, distrust of the organized church, putting work first, or putting leisure first. It really is deadly to drop out of church, so work with people on this. It is still not exactly what Hebrews is about, but it is important to attend.

Chapter 10:26-31 then moves to the next phase, the warning phase, in which he is describing to them the danger of deliberate sin. He says "now if we deliberately"—do you see the transition? He says let us do all these positive things and then he says there is also one negative: let us not forsake the assembly because, verse 26, "if we deliberately keep on sinning after we have the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice is left but only fearful expectation of judgment and raging fire that will consume the enemies of God." That promise in chapter 2—"I will make your enemies a footstool for your feet"—that will happen to us. We will become a footstool, and when God avenges Himself on His enemies, that will happen to us. Then the author says that he does not think that is what will happen to the Hebrews. What he thinks will happen to them is, verse 32, they will remember the earlier days and they will return to those days. So he says, in verse 35 and following, "Do not throw away your confidence. God is coming soon." Then in verse 39, he says, "And we are not of those who shrink back and forsake the assembly and are destroyed, but we are the ones who believe and we are the ones who are saved." God is coming. And although the author worries about them, he knows they will persevere. He knows they will be faithful. He knows they will not shrink back. He knows that by God's grace, they will show again the fidelity they showed the first time, but the crucial thing here is to remain faithful, to have faith, to show faith. That leads us, of course, to the great faith chapter of Hebrews 11.

Before we get into the chapter, I would just like to play a tiny bit of a game with you and ask you if you would be willing to think with me about what faith is. First of all, I just want to tell you about faith and give you a classic definition of faith. Theologians have historically said that faith has three parts. The first is knowledge. If you believe that Jesus was a monk who lived in Sri Lanka in the year 925 to 945 AD, and He was a great teacher of wisdom, you will not be saved by believing in Jesus. You have to know who He was and what He did. That is knowledge. The second thing is assent, that is to say, agreement. You must say, “Not only do I know that the Bible teaches this or Christians teach this, but I actually believe that it is true.” You understand that there are some people who know the content of the Christian faith very well but they do not believe it. An example would be perhaps some professors of religion, or people who study culture. They might study Christian culture and history and beliefs for some reason without believing that it is true. So assent is essential for true faith.

The third part of faith is trust, that is to say, not only believing it cognitively, but believing it in your heart. Trust means believing it affectively, believing it with the whole being, and laying your life into the hands of the Lord. Knowledge, assent, and trust: that is just a quick definition of faith.

What I would like you to do is to think about the time-frame of faith for a moment. Of course, we all have three time-frames in which we operate: the past, the present and the future. Let me just ask you a simple question: when you think about Paul, when you think about faith, do you think about it relating more to the past, the present or the future? Are you thinking essentially about the past, looking back at what Christ did in the past and trusting in Christ’s completed work? Are you thinking primarily in the terms of the present, about how you are trusting Christ right now? Or are you thinking of faith primarily as something in the future—what Jesus will do for you some day?

I think that in Paul’s theology, his focus is very much on looking back and understanding Christ’s sacrifice—His death and His resurrection and how that provides atonement for us. Of course, there are references to trusting in Christ now and there are some things about Christ coming again, but we probably think of Paul as mostly meditating on the work of Christ in the past and its implications for us.

Now what about Hebrews? Where does Hebrews focus? And the answer is that the author has a special focus. Of course, he is interested in the present, and of course he is interested in the past, but to some extent he is going to emphasize the future orientation of faith. What I would like to do is to move quickly through Hebrews 11 and show you how the heroes of the faith are essentially pointed toward the future. I will just start with verse 1: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” Verse 6 says, “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” Of course, their reward is future. And in verse 7, we have Noah. You see how Noah’s faith was future-oriented. What was he believing? He was believing that it was going to rain. It is possible that he had never seen rain, and one way of interpreting the Old Testament teaching about Noah is that he built that ark for 120 years. We might say that every time he picked up his tools, every time he worked on building that box, he was demonstrating his belief. (An ark is not a boat, by the way, an ark is a box. It was not made to navigate rivers. It was a box that floated. The ark has 90-degree angles; it does not have a balanced stern.) Every time Noah built that huge box on dry land, he was saying, “I believe that it will rain.”

What about some other patriarchs? What about Abraham? Was Abraham’s faith future-oriented? What are some indications of his future orientation? What was Abraham looking to God to do? He believed that if he sacrificed Isaac, God would raise him from the dead. How old was Abraham when Isaac was born? He was 100 years old. He was 99 when it was announced. How long did he wait? He waited for

25 years. In chapter 12 of Genesis, he was given some promises: he would have land, he would have seed (descendants), and he would be a blessing to the nations. How much of that did he see? He was told that his descendants would be as numerous as sand in the seashore. The truth is, he saw seven children, if you read the whole story. He saw seven or eight children, but that is not multitudes like the sand of the seashore, and he really had only one heir. With regards to the land, the only land he owned was the land he buried his wife in, so he hardly got any of it. He looked forward. God called him to a land he did not know and he wandered around seeking a home.

How about the other patriarchs? There is an odd little thing in chapter 11:22-24. It says that Joseph, near the end of his life, gave instructions to the Israelites about his bones. The reason that he cared about his bones is that he wanted to be buried in the land that God had promised. His descendants carried his bones out of Egypt, because he believed God's promise that there would be a land that his people would possess. Moses' faith was primarily future-oriented. The focal point of Moses' life, what he was looking for in his ministry all the time, was the Promised Land and entering the Promised Land. Did he enter the Promised Land? He only saw it from a mountaintop, so he too was future-oriented in his faith and not only so, but the next section, in verses 32-39, shows how much this had to be so. Verses 32-39 show with sort of a progression what faith is like in hard times. He says, "What more shall I say? I do not have time to tell you about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms and administered justice." These first two are positive. We could think of David and Samuel here. David conquered kingdoms. Samuel administered justice, and he gained what was promised, just like David did. He got a huge kingdom. But then the tone of the passage begins to shift a little, and he says that they "shut the mouths of lions and quenched the fury of the flames." Now he is talking about Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Then he says, "whose weakness was turned to strength and became powerful in battle"—that may be a reference to David or to Gideon—"and routed foreign armies." So now we are back to the conquest, but then there is a further reference to trouble in verse 35: "Women received back their dead raised to life again." Sometimes they won these battles, administered justice, had kingdoms, and defeated enemies, but now we have worked in three negatives. They shut the mouths of lions, escaped from the flames, and received back their dead. What kind of victories are those? These are victories of escape. Escaping the flames is not a victory of an army, it is escaping from being killed. The narrowest of all escapes is when your child dies and then is brought back.

Now it gets even worse. He goes on to say, "Others were tortured and refused to be released." There was never an escape for them. They were told that if they would just repudiate God, they could be released, but they would not do it and they never were released—"so they might gain a better resurrection." That implies that they were killed. "Some faced jeers and flogging, while others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were put to death by the sword." Now we have no deliverances of all from terrible deaths. "They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted, and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground."

Do you see what he is doing here? He starts off with his portrait of faith as future-oriented and then he says, "Sometimes it was great, splendid victory. Other times faith allowed us to escape, but, brothers and sisters," he says, "there were times when faith was expressed by not repudiating the faith even though you had to die for it." That is future orientation. That is saying, "I do not see how it will ever come. The only way in which my faith will finally receive its fruition is after my death and after my resurrection." He goes on to say, at the end of chapter 11, that these were commended for their faith. Now the word here—"commended"—is sort of a play on words in the Greek. The word is *martyrethentes*. Do you hear the word "martyr" in that word? A "martyr" does not exactly mean somebody who is slain. The verb

martyreo means “to witness” or “to testify,” and *martyr*, the noun form of this word, means “a witness” or “someone who testifies.” The strongest form of witness or testimony is when you are willing to die for your testimony. That is the origin of the English word “martyr,” but the idea here is that God commended them, God testified to them, or God attested them. He said, “It is now certain, and I will testify that it is certainly true that they had real faith even though they never received what was promised, because they were willing to die for their faith.” This proves that God was on their side. Some people sometimes say, “Where is your God now? If your God is so great, why doesn’t He get you out of jail? If your God is so great, how did you fall into our hands?” The answer is, even when that taunt comes, God still commends or testifies, “Yes, I am on their side. Yes, I am their God and they will receive vindication in eternity.” Indeed, he says in verse 40, “God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.” We go on to maturity together.

The first verse of chapter 12 then introduces the next theme almost seamlessly. Here in chapter 12:1, what we have is this call to run on in the faith, but it is not simply a matter of us running on. This is hidden by our English translations. In verse 1 it says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses”—can you guess what that word’s going to be? It is that same word, a word from that same *martyreo* family. God witnessed to those people, and now when we run, we are surrounded by those who are witnessing to God. That is to say, when someone is willing to give himself to God even to the point of death, God testifies to him, but that is not all. He also testifies to God. Now you see how this is being applied to the Hebrews. Chapter 12:1 says, “Therefore since we”—he is ready to draw conclusions again—“are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, let us”—notice that here we have this “let us” being repeated again—“let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run the race marked out for us.”

Here is what this means. When we as Christians run the race, we are not in a stadium, running with a group of spectators. The people surrounding us are not people who do not really understand what we are doing, but who are cheering us on nevertheless. On the contrary, the people who surround us are people who have run the exact race. They are not spectators, they are not crowds, they are not the audience, but they are witnesses who say, “I also ran, and God was faithful to me—even though I died, perhaps, I lived. God was faithful to me and He carried me to the end and He will be faithful to you as well.” Have you ever seen an audience in which there was someone in the audience who knew exactly what the performer was up to? There was a concert on campus about a week ago in which a wonderful guitarist was playing. I know how to play the guitar well enough for me. I can play G, D, C, A, E, E minor, A minor, and about three other chords, which I think is just great, but he was doing a lot more than that. His fingers were flying all over the place, and I knew that he was really good, but there were three people in the row in front of me who were just going crazy the whole time. The guitarist would be playing something, and especially one of the men who was sitting there would say, “Oh! Oh!” and, “Did you see that?” and agonizing and bending over and lifting his hands and writing things down. I just had to find out who he was. I knew that he had to be either a professional guitarist or an instructor of guitar or an expert in the history of guitar playing or a critic for *Rolling Stone* magazine or something. In fact, the man who was groaning with ecstasy was a professor of guitar and the person he was hitting the most was a professional guitarist who plays in bands around St. Louis. They were good enough to know what was going on. I knew it was good, but they were saying, “This is unbelievable! I am a professional and I cannot believe it!” When we run the Christian race, that is what we have. We have people who know exactly what we are going through. They appreciate exactly how difficult it is to be faithful and they say, “God will carry you through.” God will carry you through, and therefore let us run with endurance the race that is marked out for us.