

Hebrews 10:19-39 A call to perseverance

Introduction

We all have those moments in life when there is a huge temptation to quit. For the marathon runner a few miles from the finish there can be waves of extreme tiredness when it would be so easy to pull into the side of the road and not finish the race. For the majority of us who have never entered a marathon there are plenty of other situations in which perseverance is called for. For some people it is keeping going with a difficult family member or friend or doing what it takes to keep a marriage or other relationship in the right place. For our young people at the present time keeping their discipline of studying appropriately in preparation for the exams they have been sitting; for someone else it can be work pressures when maybe others are cutting corners and getting away with it, but we remember that as Christians we are seeking to honour God in each area of our lives so we continue to maintain our standards and values. In this specific context our author is writing to Jewish followers of Jesus in Italy who are facing severe persecution for their faith. In this chapter of Hebrews details are given of the cost to them of following Jesus. In the midst of it all they, and subsequent generations of Christians, are urged to keep our eyes on Jesus and stand firm in the faith we profess. It is a personal plea to people under severe pressure to recognise that it will not go on for ever. Will you keep faithful to your calling? I hope and pray each one of us will do so.

1. Taking the plunge (Hebrews 10:19-22)

(a) Entering with confidence (Hebrews 10:19) ¹⁹ *Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus...* Notice the key word is *confidence* in this verse. It is not because we are good enough but because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross or is continuing to do for us in prayer in heaven at the present time. Under the Old Covenant a person had to approach God through a priest, but now can do so directly as a child of God. At Primary school I had a teacher who appeared to be quite fierce at times to the infant class of which I was a member. However, it all changed when I was placed next to another boy who shared another perspective on my teacher. He assured me that she didn't mean all the things she warned us about when we stepped out of line and was really a very nice lady. On what basis did he say these words? Why could he be so self-assured? It was simple she was his mother. The relationship with her differed from that of any other child in that class; I suspect he might have been in a bit of bother had she known what he was saying to his friends in the class! In a similar way the child of God has a perspective on God that differs significantly from the person who has yet to place their trust in Him. An unbeliever might have a fear of God and a concern for what might happen to them after death- which is no bad thing as we need to make our peace with God and come to trust Him through Jesus. However, when we have entered His family by faith in Jesus the relationship has changed for ever. We want to do what is right because of His love for us and so we desire to do what pleases Him. We must not forget the sense of privilege of entering God's presence as His children. Our author reminds us that under the Old Covenant only the High Priest had such access and that was only once a year on the Day of Atonement. Have you? Have I lost sight of just how privileged we are to have access directly to the King of Kings in prayer? Paul in Romans 5:1-2 stated: *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.* I hope we not only have confidence in God hearing and answering our prayers, but a continued sense of the honour accorded to us as His children.

(b) **Entering with gratitude** (Hebrews 10:20-21) *by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body,*²¹ *and since we have a great priest over the house of God...* The other side of the confidence is gratitude. On what basis is it so straightforward that I can come to God in prayer? We know the answer that so easily slips off our tongues – because Jesus died in my place on the cross. This is correct –so simple a young child could articulate it. However, when we have been Christians for some years our familiarity with this truth can cause our enthusiasm and gratitude for it at times to dim. This is true in so many contexts. Life is hectic and although we may be so grateful to someone who did us a good turn last week or month or year – our minds understandably turn to the next challenges or issue before us. The author of Hebrews has a particular point to make to these first Jewish hearers and readers of his letter. You are tempted to go back to the Jewish faith as you practised it prior to coming to faith in Jesus. Do you really grasp what this means? Jesus has transformed the way we approach God by destroying the barrier that existed between sinful creatures and their creator- symbolised by the huge curtain in the Temple in Jerusalem. When that curtain was torn in two from the top to the bottom –and by God – it was the end of an era. No cyclist would return to hard rubber tyres after the invention of pneumatic tyres; no business could back to the era before the invention of modern communication technologies - the world has changed and while we value and appreciate the past it is a different age. We do not live there any more! We need to retain a sense of gratitude to God for the transformation of our relationship with Him through Jesus.

(c) **Entering with sincerity** (Hebrews 10:22)²² *let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.* Under the Old Covenant the priests had set rituals to follow prior to entering God’s presence. With respect to Aaron, the brother of Moses and the High priest of his day, Leviticus 16:4 described the preparations he was required to make before starting his work. *He is to put on the sacred linen tunic, with linen undergarments next to his body; he is to tie the linen sash round him and put on the linen turban. These are sacred garments; so he must bathe himself with water before he puts them on* (Exodus 29:4-9 has more details). Now as Christians we are not prescribed a form of dress to approach God at home or in church, but we must not come any less respectfully to God. God is never our ‘pal’. He is *Our Father in heaven* (Matthew 6:9a). There is a reverence due to Him. The prayer Jesus taught His disciples had these words as a core reference point and request in our petitions: *Hallowed be Your name* (Matthew 6:9b); we live in a culture at the present time where respect for people in authority is at an all-time low; for example, the doctor in the surgery may have to endure challenges to their medical competence from the ‘wisdom’ googled by their patient minutes before their visit! We can get the information we need about medical matters online but interpreting it adequately requires training and skill that has been undertaken by the doctor. Sadly a few rogue doctors have damaged the position of the vast majority of excellent professionals –the same can be said of every profession in its respective field. There are people with the audacity to question God as if they knew better. God does not mind genuinely sincere questions from the heart being raised with Him, but some are raised with an air of moral superiority that is inappropriate. The reference to *our bodies washed with pure water...* is very likely a reminder of their baptismal promises and commitment and in this context serves as a call to refocus on giving God wholehearted commitment from a sincere heart.

2. **Holding Firm** (Hebrews 10:23-25)

Our author here in these verses repeats points already made, but sometimes we need to show how urgently someone needs to take action by repeating a request to them. What is highlighted here?

(a) **Our personal responsibility** (Hebrews 10:23) ²³ *Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful.* Promises are made to be kept. Our word is our bond. It is very old-fashioned nowadays to live this way, but it is a delight to meet people who maintain high standards of personal integrity. When I worked for a short time in sales many years ago the management told us that people could not be trusted to stick to their promises. ‘They will say what you want to hear till you have left the room or the premises’. Unfortunately that is too often true. However, what they struggled to grasp was the surprising notion that some staff including myself reported –on occasions- a different experience of people trusting my word and vice versa. It never seemed to happen for staff who did not share these principles. People notice the way we live and admire those who maintain high standards of personal integrity. Most of the time they will not articulate it to us in words; in our witness the highest priority is living what we proclaim –opportunities to use words will come in time when this is the case. God’s work becomes fruitful over the longer term. We persevere in maintaining our values and principles because this is honouring to God. It is based on the fact that *He who promised is faithful*. There are quite a number of references in the Bible to individuals testifying to the faithfulness of God in keeping His promises. Praise God for the faithful dedicated Christians whose service for the Lord is consistent year after year; decade after decade. Can that be said of you and me? I hope so.

(b) **Our corporate duty** (Hebrews 10:24-25a) ²⁴ *And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another...* Our author highlights two specific areas for attention in the context of his hearers and readers. It has to be underlined that the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion or DIY Christianity. All the images of the Christian Church are plural, for example the images of a family, a flock or a body with many members. Even the model prayer Jesus taught His disciples is deliberately worded in plural form: *when you pray say Our Father...* (Matthew 6:9); in worship and witness and service we offer it collectively for the glory of God. We are not required to live communally, although some Christians have done so over the centuries, but the individualism of our Western culture is too often corrosive and unhelpful in living the kind of lives God desires us to live. Our church fellowships should be caring communities where we support one another as needs arise. We cannot solve each other’s problems but we can stand with people in the midst of them.

The second problem heightened here by our author is on time management. Where in our priorities is gathering for worship each week as Christians? We have diaries or other planners and just as we need to fix work appointments and commitments and family ones. Gathering for worship services on a Sunday ought to be a top priority that is safeguarded in our schedules. Our hobbies and entertainment cannot be given a higher place than gathering with God’s people to worship as He has directed us. Do we need to re-order our priorities? Gatherings for public as well as private prayer are also often neglected by Christians. We cannot always make meetings –life can be hectic and time management can be a real problem sometimes, but too often the more important things take a lesser place. Thank God for the Christians who are able under pressure to maintain the highest priorities in their commitments, but then and now some followers of Jesus need to be reminded at any given time that our priorities need to be better aligned with His in our lives – if we are going to live for Jesus as we should.

(c) **Our ultimate incentive** (Hebrews 10:25b) – *and all the more as you see the Day approaching*. It will not be for ever. Not only are we all getting older and tie flies by, but Jesus is coming again. How would we feel about our current priorities if Jesus was to return this year? It should not make a huge difference to our priorities if we are living as we should. John Wesley was famously asked this question about his commitments –if Jesus were to return in a day or two. He simply got out his diary and read out his planned commitments and said he had no need to change anything –if this was correct! We may not have the iron self-discipline of a John Wesley, but keeping our focus on why we are here on earth is so important. One day we will stand before the Lord and give an account of our time here –so we have a responsibility to live now as we will be happy to account for then; a hundred years ago it is possible some Christians were too focussed on looking for the signs of Jesus’ second coming. I suspect it is the opposite today where if we are honest we are not really too expectant of it. Recognising this truth has a two-fold benefit to us as Christians. For believers like those in Italy who first received this letter it was an encouragement that their suffering would not go on for ever. There was a limit to their trials. It would give them hope to carry on. By contrast to those of us in much more comfortable surroundings this truth sometimes can serve as a necessary wakeup call to continue in or to return to dedicated Christian service. The good work and opportunities now before us will not last forever. We must make the time we have left count for the Lord.

3. **The importance of remembering** (Hebrews 10:26-35)

(a) **The dangers of folly** (Hebrews 10:26-31) ²⁶ *If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, ²⁷ but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. ²⁸ Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? ³⁰ For we know Him who said, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ and again, ‘The Lord will judge His people.’ ³¹ It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.* The genuine Christian will show evidence of their claims in their conduct. If Paul in his letter rightly emphasised that we are saved by God’s grace alone received through faith alone. The letter of James rightly reminds us that genuine faith is accompanied by the fruit of such a commitment – Christian service. For example, James 2:14-17 declares: *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.* We need to have a balance here because we cannot help every needy person or volunteer for every vacant position for ministry in our local church or community! We must be careful as Christians not to think we have to do everything as this prevents opportunities on occasions for other people. However, for example, when we have planned our financial giving to particular causes we can with both a clear conscience and with confidence say to advocates of other good causes who may knock at our door or come up to us in the street that we appreciate the good work done but we are committed to other causes. Likewise in terms of volunteering –if we plan what we can commit to at church and the local community, it is with a good conscience that we can decline other possible avenues of service without feeling too guilty. However, our author here in these verses is not writing about genuine believers. We all can have temporary lapses in convictions or conduct, but this is of a different order altogether.

Here the person or people in mind have heard the truth clearly and consciously choose to ignore it or even despise it. This is the most serious mistake anyone can make in their lives. When God asked His beloved Son Jesus to go through the agonies of the cross for us so that we might have eternal life He has every right to respond with clear judgement on those who callously disregard Jesus' sacrifice for us. The author has in mind intentional deliberate and sustained departures from God's standards over a significant period of time. The person who is genuinely concerned about their eternal welfare is by definition in a better place as their conscience is reminding them to ensure they are right with God. Is there someone here or reading this message who needs to address sin in their lives and turn from it and get back on track with God? Ask the Holy Spirit to prompt us when this is the case so that we may live lives pleasing to Him.

(b) **The blessings of faithfulness** (Hebrews 10:32-35) ³² *Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering.* ³³ *Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated.* ³⁴ *You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.* ³⁵ *So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.* The Psalms time and again look back on the history of God's dealings with His people and past blessings provide an opportunity for present encouragement and praise to God. 'Count your blessings name them one by one...' is a simple old song but so true. The faithfulness of God through our past trials can encourage us in our present difficulties. It is most helpful to write down answers to prayer and resolution of trails so that we can read what we have written on future occasions and be encouraged afresh by these blessings. These verses highlight the particular trials they had faced or were currently facing, but through it all God had been faithful. *Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail.* ²³ *They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.* ²⁴ *I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for Him'* (Lamentations 3:22-24). The God who helped Jeremiah can help them then and us today.

4. **The rewards of obedience** (Hebrews 10:36-39)

(a) **Be patient He is coming!** (Hebrews 10:36-37) ³⁶ *You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised.* ³⁷ *For, 'In just a little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay.'* Christ's return has been delayed longer than His people would have liked in many a generation. Why is this? ⁹ *The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. Instead He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance* (II Peter 3:9). God's timing relates to His purposes for people in the past, the present and the future. Our calling is to keep our eyes on what He has asked us to do. In a number of ball sports participants are asked to 'play to the whistle', that is the referee is in charge and the game continues until the official calls a halt. Our calling in service for Jesus is to continue faithfully with the task entrusted to us until Jesus brings this world to an end with His return. May His promised coming both encourage and motivate us to persevere in the work we have to do.

(b) **Be persistent He will conquer!** (Hebrews 10:38-39) ³⁸ *And, 'But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back.'* ³⁹ *But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.* Luther took particular encouragement in this section of Hebrews 10 when the storm of controversy over his posting of the Ninety-Five Theses on the church door in Germany and its subsequent debates and struggles leading to the Protestant Reformation. Will you and I commit to complete our course in obedience to the Lord? Paul wrote these words in II Timothy 1:11-12: *And of this*

gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. ¹² That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day. I pray that each of us may share both His confidence in God together with his determination to complete the calling entrusted to us, for Jesus' sake, Amen.