

## MOVING ON TO MATURITY

### *Perseverance*

Hebrews 10:19-25

Perseverance. The word comes from the prefix *per*, meaning “through,” coupled with the word “severe.” It means to keep pressing on *through* tough times, *through* severe circumstances. As Paul and Barnabas returned to key cities where they had founded churches, they strengthened the disciples, all the while reminding them: “We must go through many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

Far too many 21<sup>st</sup> Century believers have a “couch-potato” perspective on Christianity. We have had just enough of biblical Christianity to inoculate us against the real thing. The concept of counting the cost and embracing the cross is foreign to our convenience oriented style of life. I’ll embrace Christianity, as long as it doesn’t cost me something.

Unfortunately, such a perspective has been around for some time. In fact, the believers addressed in the book of Hebrews were wavering in their commitment. They had started out strong, even to the point of suffering persecution for their faith. Some had experienced the confiscation of their property and others had been imprisoned for their faith (cf. 10:34). But now there was a growing tendency to pull back from God and to pull away from his people, the local church. Perseverance was the need of the hour. They needed to move *through* severe times. And we do, too.

What difficulty, trial, or temptation are you facing today? Or have you faced this past week? Or will you face this next week? Where is God calling you to persevere? And just *how* do I persevere?

This morning we come to one of the most important sections of the book of Hebrews. This passage captures the essence of what this book is all about. If you miss this, you’ve missed the big idea of what the writer is trying to get across. Remember, this letter is really a sermon. As I prepare a message, I’m always asking myself, “What is God calling us to *do* or *change* on the basis of the truth communicated?” And the writer to the Hebrews has done the same. For him, the answer to that question is found right here in these verses.

As I read this passage, I would like you to help me in emphasizing the commands that we are given. They each tell us something important about how we persevere in difficulty. They’re easy to identify since they each begin with the words “Let us...” Each time I come to a “let us,” I want you to say that with me clearly and loudly.

<sup>19</sup> Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup> by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, <sup>21</sup> and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup> **let us** draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. <sup>i 23</sup> **Let us** hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. <sup>24</sup> And **let us** consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. <sup>25</sup> **Let us** not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but **let us** encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:19-25

## LOOK UP

Just how do we persevere (*i.e.* go through severe times) in the Christian life? How do we experience what Eugene Peterson calls a “long obedience?” We are first of all to *look up*. The preacher tells us in no uncertain terms in verse 22: “*Let us draw near to God* with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith...” Our first step in perseverance is to look up, and we look up by drawing near to God.

What does it mean to “draw near” to God? In a certain sense, we as believers are always “near” to God. In fact, this is one of the main themes of this book. We stand forgiven. We have been “made holy.” In that sense, we enjoy relationship with God throughout the day and every day. And yet in spite of this we are told to “draw near” to God. What does this mean?

I believe that Hebrews 4 answers that question for us. Turn with me to Hebrews 4:7: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”<sup>ii</sup> In fact, that exhortation is repeated three times in chapters 3 and 4.<sup>iii</sup> And just how do we hear God’s voice? In His Word. Hebrews 4:12 goes on to say, “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword.” The first way we draw near to God is by hearing his voice in his Word.

But there’s a second way. Hebrews 4:16 says, “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” To “draw near” and “to approach the throne of grace” refers to the same thing – coming to God to voice our need in prayer.<sup>iv</sup>

To “draw near to God” brings us back to two of the basics of the Christian life: the Word of God and prayer. These are two means of grace that God has given you and me which transform our *positional* nearness to God into an *experiential* nearness to God.

A.W. Tozer in his book *The Pursuit of God* puts it this way:

To have found God and still to pursue Him is the soul’s paradox of love, scorned indeed by the too-easily-satisfied religionist, but justified in happy experience by the children of the burning heart.

Let me stop right there. Do you belong to the camp of the “too-easily-satisfied religionist?” If you do, you probably won’t draw near to God on a regular basis, listening to his voice in his Word and voicing your needs in prayer. Or do you belong to “the children of the burning heart?”

What will probably make the difference is your appreciation of *why* we should draw near to God. You see, familiarity breeds contempt. One reason that some of us are not “children of the burning heart” is because we have lost sight of the awesome privilege that we have in drawing near to God. That’s why the speaker says in verse 19, “...since we have confidence...”<sup>v</sup>

Therefore, brothers, *since* we have confidence<sup>vi</sup> to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body...

We might have a hard time grasping just how revolutionary this was for the First Century believer coming out of a background of Judaism. The average practicing Jew had it deeply ingrained in his thinking that nobody, absolutely *nobody*, could enter the Most Holy Place except the High Priest and then only once a year. But this passage is saying that each one of us, and even more importantly, that all of us *together*, can come directly into God's very presence!<sup>vii</sup>

This new and living way is "through the curtain, that is, his [Christ's] body." What is this "curtain?" The allusion is to the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the other portions of the tabernacle and later the Jewish temple. At the time of Christ, this curtain or veil was 30 feet high, 30 feet wide, and a handbreadth thick. Matthew, Mark and Luke all mention what happened when Jesus cried out with a loud voice on the cross and then died. It says that the veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom. The veil that previously separated people from coming directly into God's presence has now been torn through Christ's death. His body, sacrificed for us, *is* that veil. And through him we can now come boldly and with confidence before God.<sup>viii</sup>

When you pray, read Scripture, talk to God, or gather to worship with other believers, do you picture yourself as actually entering into the Most Holy Place, the very presence of God? You see, it is this perspective that will move us from the camp of the "all-too-easily satisfied religionist" into the camp of "the children of the burning heart."

So how do we persevere in the Christian life? We first of all look up by drawing near.<sup>ix</sup> Have you built this discipline of drawing near to God into your life?

## LOOK AHEAD

How do we persevere? We first of all *look up* by drawing near to God. But there is more. We also need to *look ahead*. Verse 23 says "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful."

Hope is often stereotyped as mere wishful thinking or the expression of a desire. An adult says, "I hope I win the lottery!" or a teen-age girl tells her best friend "I hope he'll ask me out" or my youngest boy says "I hope I don't have to eat that spinach Mom put on the table." But all that is mere wishful thinking. On the other hand, biblical hope is better understood as "certain anticipation." And it is this sense of certain anticipation that can take you and me through the most intense suffering and lead us out the other side all the stronger.

Several weeks ago I was talking with Mary Lynne about her wedding. I asked her how she was feeling. She said something like, "Well, just 312 hours and 30 minutes left to go." She was living each day in excited anticipation of that moment of being united with her husband-to-be. The Bible says that you and I are the bride of Christ. And as his bride, we are to live each day of our lives in excited anticipation of our union at his return.

C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* says that hope is "continually looking forward to the eternal world." But in the book of Hebrews it is even more specific than that. I believe verse 36 of this chapter helps us understand what this hope is: "You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised" (Hebrews 10:36). What are we anticipating? It's not just the eternal world. It is more specifically Christ's rich reward for work

well done. That's why these verses conclude in verse 25 with then encouragement to carry out these "let us" commands "all the more as you see the Day approaching." What "day" is that? The day when Christ returns to take home his church and establish his kingdom. Martin Luther once said, "There are only two days on my calendar: Today and that Day!" And the certainty of "that Day" needs to influence how I live today.

## LOOK OUT

How do you and I persevere in the Christian life? We *look up* by drawing near to God. We *look ahead* by holding unswervingly to the confident expectation of Christ's rich reward for work well done. And finally, we persevere by *looking out* ...for one another. This is found in the next three "let us" commands of verses 24-25:

And *let us* consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. *Let us* not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but *let us* encourage one another-and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

In the language of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century writer, there is really only one command in these verses. It's found in verse 24: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." The next two "let us" commands simply explain *how* to spur one another on to love and good deeds.

There are over 12 "one another" commands in the New Testament, two of which are found right here in these verses. But "criticize one another" is *not* one of them." Unfortunately, some believers act as if that's one of the "one another" commands in the Bible. But just the opposite is true. We are not to criticize, but to consider. Consider what? How we can "*spur one* another on to love and good deeds." Or as the New Living Translation puts it: "...to outbursts of love and good deeds." That comes from the idea of the word "spur." What does a "spur" do? When riding a horse, it "provokes" the horse to action. It stimulates, it motivates. And that's what we are to for one another. We are not called to criticize, but to consider just how we can motivate one another to love and good deeds.

But there is no impact without contact. We can't spur one another on in the Christian life if we are not meeting together. And that's why the speaker goes on to say: "Don't give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing" (verse 25).

For these Hebrew believers times were tough. Persecution was growing. There was the tendency to "go it alone." They didn't realize that to pull back from the church was to pull back from Christ. To drift away from the Body (the Church) was to drift away from the Head of the Body (Christ).

I really believe that many Christians today just don't get it. I believe that some within *our* church just don't get it. Our rugged American individualism blinds us to just how much we need others in the Body of Christ. Isolation from the Body of Christ is isolation from the person of Christ. The two are inseparable

So ask yourself: Am I faithful as a regular participant in the gathered, worshipping community of believers? If your car starts once every three tries, is it reliable? If you don't show up at work once or twice a month, are you faithful? If your refrigerator stops working for a day or two every now and then, is it dependable? If you miss a couple of loan payments on your house each year, does the bank say, "Well, ten out of twelve isn't too bad?" Now let me ask you: How often do you miss gathering together with God's "house," the visible, worshipping community of believers? Once a month? Twice a month? You see, we expect faithfulness and reliability from things and other people. Doesn't God expect the same from us?

Let me take this a step further, touching on *why* it is so easy for some of us to neglect the meeting together of believers. Bottom line, it has to do with how we view the church, and more specifically, the purpose of our weekly worship service. Even the way our auditorium is arranged says something about our weekly worship that is *not* taught in the Bible. According to this passage, we are to meet together to carry out the one another commands. And this is not unique to these Hebrew Christians. We see the same dynamic in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Each believer was to come to the weekly gathering with a song, a teaching or a word to encourage the others (1 Corinthians 14). But contrast that with the way we are set up. A very small percentage of our people are "up front" on a platform and everybody else is seated in rows facing the same direction. And no matter what I say to the contrary, everything about our set-up tells you that you are merely part of the "audience." And if I am merely "part of the audience," then it really doesn't matter that much if I show up or not. Or if I am merely "part of the audience," then it really doesn't matter if, when I do come, if I show up late or leave early. After all, I'm here for the "performance!"

I mean, think about it. What if I decided this morning that it was really just too hard to make it here to our weekly gathering. After all, I worked on my deck yesterday afternoon. I'm a little sore. Everybody deserves a little rest. I think I'll just stay home. Well, I could do that. But I think the chairman of the Board would show up in my office tomorrow morning! And some people in the church might begin to get a little upset. And what if I did that, not just one Sunday morning, but maybe once a month? Or maybe twice a month? Before long you would send me on a permanent vacation!

But for what biblical reason should *I* not be absent, or the other *pastors* should not be absent, or *someone on the worship team* should not be absent, but *you* can be absent? I believe it all comes down to how we view the church. If we are here for a performance, then it really doesn't matter too much if the people in the pews are absent or not. But if we are here because (1) we have a great priest over the house of God, i.e. the visible, gathered worshipping community of believers (as verse 21 tells us); and (2) we each desperately need one another if we are to persevere in the Christian life, then we will think twice about taking our gathering so lightly.

The redwood trees of northern California are some of the oldest and tallest things on earth. They tower over 300 feet high and some are nearly 2500 years old. They've weathered many a storm. You would think that such massive trees would have a root system that reaches hundreds of feet into the ground. Actually, the giant redwoods have a very shallow system of roots. But they all interlock. And when the storms come and the winds blow, the redwoods stand. Why? Because each tree doesn't stand alone. All the trees support and protect each other.

Believers of Central Bible Church – we need one another. If we are to grow tall and strong, we must have inter-locking roots. You can't "go it alone!" We are each indispensable to the growth of the body.

Persevere. What does it mean? It means "through severe times." To go through the challenges of the Christian life, we must look up, look ahead and look out ... for one another.

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<sup>i</sup> The cleansing of our hearts seems to refer to the forgiveness and declaration of righteousness that we receive at the point of conversion. On the other hand, the "washing with pure water" seems to refer to the ongoing forgiveness that we are invited to experience on the basis of 1 John 1:9. Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us today our daily bread...and forgive us our sins..."

<sup>ii</sup> Citing Psalm 95:7,8

<sup>iii</sup> Heb. 3:7, 15; 4:7.

<sup>iv</sup> This idea of "drawing near" has already been mentioned one time in this same chapter. In verse one it refers to believers in Old Testament who would "draw near to worship" (10:1). This is to be done individually. But it is also to be done corporately.

<sup>v</sup> The second motivation to draw near to God is found in verse 21: "and *since* we have a great priest over the house of God."<sup>v</sup> What makes our priest, Jesus Christ, so great? Part of the answer is found in chapter 7, verse 25: "he is able to save forever those who *draw near to God* through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them (NASB)" The "salvation" this verse is talking about is *not* salvation from hell, but salvation (i.e. help) through difficulty. And the reason he is able to help you and me through difficulty is because he is always praying for you and me.

<sup>vi</sup> In 4:19 he says, "have confidence." But here he says, "since we have this confidence." The difference is found in the truth explained our Christ's superior priesthood in chapters 5-10.

<sup>vii</sup> This way opened up for us is "new." That is, it did not previously exist. It is also "living," because Jesus Christ, who is both priest and sacrifice, is living. We don't come to God on the basis of a sinful high priest who brings a dead animal. We come to God on the basis of a righteous high priest who offered his own body and then rose from the dead and lives today!

<sup>viii</sup> Cf. Hebrews 4:16; 10:35.

<sup>ix</sup> The writer urges us to continually and intentionally draw near to God in specific times of worship and prayer. It is a command, implying *intentionality*. And it is a command in the present tense, implying *regularity*.