



RUNNING WITH PERSEVERANCE

*A Christ-Centered Call to Endurance
From the Book of Hebrews*

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Introduction to Series

“You need to persevere.” Those are the explicit words of exhortation from the author of Hebrews to his people (10:36). He could recall a former time when their faith was vibrant— “when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering” (10:32).

But time has passed. There were complications. The long wait of believers anticipating God’s full renewal had lingered. And the question started creeping in: **“Is it really worth it?”**

Hebrews—apparently an early sermon (13:22, where he calls his message “a word of exhortation,” the same phrase used in Acts 13:15 to describe Paul’s sermon at Pisidian Antioch)—is a brilliant, impassioned call to discipleship, to the endurance of faith. How does he seek to sustain them?

First, he points again and again to Jesus. As David deSilva puts it: *“Do we think enough of Jesus? The question can have two senses, and both are important. The first sense is this: Do we hold him in high enough regard? . . . And the second sense is: Do we think of Jesus enough? . . . The preacher who composed the ‘Letter to the Hebrews’ understood that failing to think enough of Jesus—in both senses—would eventually undermine our commitment to discipleship.”*

Second, he anchors them in the words of scripture. He believes that they must wrestle with the words that could sustain them, so he digs down into the words and narrative of the Old Testament. After offering a fresh hearing of Psalm 95, he exclaims: “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow” (4:12).

Third, he underscores the importance of the full community. They have a responsibility to each other, and must “encourage one another daily . . . so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (3:13). No wonder he exhorts them to continue meeting together regularly (10:25)!

Resources for Teachers

David deSilva, *Hebrews: Grace and Gratitude*, 2020. (See also *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews,”* 2000)

Amy Peeler, *Hebrews*, 2020.

Running Against the Wind

Running With Perseverance #1

Focus Texts: 10:32-39; 12:1-3

Note for Teachers:

One reason teachers and preachers tend to shy away from studying Hebrews is that it seems so archaic and difficult. The priesthood of Melchizedek? The blood of bulls and goats?

Another reason is that some think the purpose of the book is an attempt to keep Jewish converts to Christianity from returning to Judaism. There is no evidence for that in the book. Ironically, it's often been called "The Letter of Paul to the Hebrews," which works — well, except for three little things. It isn't so much a letter as an address/sermon (13:22). There is little evidence that it was to Hebrews/Jews. And it almost certainly wasn't from Paul. (Can you imagine Paul saying that he got his message from others rather than from the Lord himself [2:1-4]?)

In this opening class, we want to help people find themselves in the book—people who need to hold onto their faith, who need to stay anchored in the words of scripture, who need to remain connected to the community of believers. We want to help our class members see that Hebrews is a valuable resource to us as we seek to be disciples for the long haul!

Lesson Outline

Opening

When you hear that we are about to launch a study of the book of Hebrews, what comes to mind? What verses or phrases, perhaps? (Rather than try to talk people out of their perceptions, allow them to recall anything they can about the book. Likely people will be fairly unfamiliar with it or will just admit that it's difficult to read and understand. Perhaps some will mention the "faith hall of fame" [11].)

So what is Hebrews? Traditionally we've thought of it as a letter, though at the end he refers to it as a "word of exhortation" (13:22). In other words, more of a sermon written down than a letter like Paul wrote.

The Audience

There are so many mysteries surrounding Hebrews: Who “wrote” this book/ sermon? When was it written? To whom was it written? (On the latter, it seems that they either were from Italy or knew people in Italy - 13:24.)

What we do know is that the church is at a crossroads, needing encouragement and warning to deepen their faith.

So, that begs the question: why did he feel the need to exhort them?

First, look at some of the exhortations in Hebrews (which serve as a sort of center of gravity for understanding):

“We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away” (2:1).

“Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts of Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest” (3:1).

“See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God” (3:12).

“Let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of [God’s rest]” (4:1).

“Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience” (4:11).

“Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess” (4:14).

“Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (4:16).

“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (10:23).

“Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (12:1).

“Let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe” (12:28).

What do you learn about the church from these exhortations? [At the minimum, we discover that he wants to encourage them because they are in some kind of danger of drifting (2:1), of shrinking back (10:32-39).]

Second, note some of the images:

“Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees” (12:12).

Invite people to describe what fatigue looks like in their own activities. Most of us know what it’s like to be on the verge of collapsing! For runners, describe those stitches in the side and the cramps that sneak up.

“So that we do not drift away” (2:1)

The image isn’t of them falling off a precipitous cliff (perhaps, e.g., from some new book they’ve read that convinced them Christianity isn’t true). Rather, it’s the slow drifting, like a boat being sucked back to the sea by the flow of the tides.

Third, look carefully in 10:32-39.

Contrast their “earlier days after [they] had received the light” with their current condition. Note that he encourages them not to throw away their confidence (a Greek word that appears four times in Hebrews: 3:6; 4:16; 10:19, 35). He candidly says: “You need to persevere.”

James Thompson points us to their plight:

“The listeners suffer from the fatigue that is characteristic of most movements that suffer from declining enthusiasm.”

“. . . the entire book is meant to encourage faint-hearted readers to maintain their commitment to Christ and the community.”

The congregation’s struggles with discouragement and persecution are evident. They’re faced with suspicion—even resistance and hostility—from their neighbors. In the book, we get a sense of how difficult it is to sustain faith when life seems so hard, when people around you resist.

Timeliness

Most people are aware that Christianity appears to be in decline in the West. We’re well familiar with declining numbers in attendance at churches, the

increasing disaffiliation of younger generations, the “shrinkling” (shrinking and wrinkling) of congregations, and the way social media has impacted the church, with societal anger and divisions sweeping through congregations. We, too, are faced with temptations to distance ourselves from spiritual fervor, investing instead in more immediate opportunities.

Hebrews might prove to be one of the most timely books in the New Testament for the church at this moment!

Resources

What is striking is that Hebrews doesn’t try to stir people up by new techniques, by new mission statements, or by different worship styles (none of which are a problem in themselves!). Rather, he speaks to their spiritual weariness by Christology, scripture, and community!

Close the class by asking them to start reading Hebrews looking for the ways he seeks to stabilize and encourage their faith (what James Thompson called “a strategy for survival”) through:

- 1) A renewed, sustained focus on Jesus
- 2) A fresh encounter with scripture
- 3) A call to re-engage with the Christian community

God's Grand Story

Running With Perseverance #2

Focus Text: 1:1 - 2:4

Note for Teachers:

Tom Long has aptly written: *"What is most striking about Hebrews is the Preacher, faced with the pastoral problems of spiritual weariness, is bold enough, maybe even brash enough, to think that christology and preaching are the answers. The Preacher does not appeal to improvised group dynamics, conflict management techniques, reorganization of the mission structures, or snappy worship services. Rather, he preaches —preaches to the congregation in complex theological terms about the nature and meaning of Jesus Christ."*

In one of the most compelling sentences in the New Testament (1:1-4 is one long sentence in Greek), the preacher gives a compact summary of the grand story of Jesus. Then, he points to how incomparable Jesus is—even when compared to angels (1:5-14). Finally, he brings all this home ("therefore") by encouraging us to pay careful attention to the Christian message and not drift away (2:1-4).

Our lesson this week seeks to underscore the vital role of healthy thinking about Jesus and invite us to take an inventory of the kind of life that is slowly drifting away from spiritual health.

Lesson Outline

In the Past (1:1)

Rather than begin with a greeting ("I Paul . . .") or a destination ("to the church in Corinth") or even with a summary of the challenges facing his people, the preacher jumps right into the long timeline of God's salvation story.

"In the past." Sadly, our relationship with the past today often falls in one of these two categories: amnesia or atavism. We tend to either forget the past or we so idealize it that we can't enjoy today.

Amnesia occurs when we're too lazy to learn from the past or when we're so sure that we've progressed beyond the old days that we choose to ignore them. We've often become like George Orwell's worlds where no one remembers the past. As Andrew Wilson has written, "In an era of instant news, amnesia is baked

in.” No wonder the Old Testament gives constant reminders to remember the deeds of our ancestors, the rock from which we were hewn.

Atavism is the obsession with some time in the past which it considers the Golden Era—whether that era is, e.g., the Roman Empire or some earlier decade in American history. Note what a temptation this can be for “restorationist” church heritages.

Instead, the preacher goes to the past to make a theological claim: God has been at work. God has been speaking and acting! A bedrock conviction of Christians is that the living God has been and is working!

So vital is this long opening paragraph, that he draws his listeners in with artistry, including alliteration (“Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers . . .”).

David deSilva suggests a way to translate the opening might be:
“Piecemeal and partial were God’s past pronouncements to the patriarchs through the prophets.”

Scot McKnight’s translation also tries to capture it: *“God, in many places and in many patterns, in the past, speaking to the patriarchs in the prophets . . .”*

In These Last Days (1:1-4)

Hebrews makes no attempt to belittle the words or actions of God in the Old Testament. But what was already amazing is now even more amazing. For in these last days, God has spoken to us “by his Son.”

Encourage your members to think through the impact of each phrase in vss. 2-4. Note how they speak of both the divinity and humanity of Jesus: his existence from the beginning, his incarnation (implied in “after he had provided purification for sins”), and his resurrection/ascension/intercession.

As deSilva notes: *“According to the preacher, God brought the world into being through the Son, governs the world through the Son, and will bring the world to its consummation through the Son. What, then, could be more important and more urgent than how we continue to respond to this Son?”*

This grand narrative of the Christian faith is so central to our existence. How could we possibly be sustained for the long haul without it? What would happen if rules or worship styles or how-we-do-church moved to the center of our identity? Before moving ahead, ask people to pause and soak in this translation from Eugene Peterson: *“Going through a long line*

of prophets, God has been addressing our ancestors in different ways for centuries. Recently he spoke to us directly through his Son. By his Son, God created the world in the beginning, and it will all belong to the Son at the end. This Son perfectly mirrors God, and is stamped with God's nature. He holds everything together by what he says —powerful words! After he finished the sacrifice for sins, the Son took his honored place high in the heavens right alongside God, far higher than any angel in rank and rule.”

The Seven Quotations (1:5-14)

In 1:5-14, the preacher reaches into Israel's history to bring new (and sometimes surprising) meaning to scriptures. Specifically, he moves back from his opening eloquence and allows God to speak: in Psalm 2:7; 2 Samuel 7:14; Deuteronomy 32:43; Psalms 104:4; 45:6-7; 102:25-27; and 110:1. By contrasting statements made about Jesus (through texts largely about David's heir) and angels, he can insist that only Jesus, the exalted one, is unchanging. Only Jesus is ultimately reliable, having already been raised to the presence of God. (Note that “the world” in v. 6 isn't the earth alone, but “the realm of God that exerts influence over the tangible universe” [Peeler]. The only other use of the word in Hebrews is in 2:5.) Only Jesus will fully and finally bring our ultimate salvation (cf. 12:26-28).

Quotations in Hebrews 1:5-14

	To the Son	To the Angels
Heb. 1:5, 6	Psalm 2:7	Deuteronomy 32:43
Heb 1:5, 7	2 Samuel 7:14	Psalm 104:4
Heb. 1:8-9	Psalm 45:6-7	
Heb. 1:10-12	Psalm 102:25-27	
Heb. 1:13	Psalm 110:1	

Such a Great Salvation (2:1-4)

In 2:1, we learn just what the preacher's concern is: that they might slowly, day-by-day drift away. Honestly, isn't that the story with so many who slip away from Christianity? Very few stumble across one book or one podcast that destroys their faith! More often, it's people who slowly begin asking, “Is it really worth it to be a Christian?” After all, life remains hard. Some prayers are seemingly unanswered.

The “therefore” in 2:1 brings his real concern. In every sense, Jesus is superior to even the angels (something they would almost certainly agree with). If that’s true, then “neglecting the Son’s message now would be far more dangerous than neglecting the angels’ message” (deSilva). Note: other passages that associate God’s Mosaic Law with the angels include Galatians 3:19 and Acts 7:38, 53.

Do You Catch the Drift?

Since the preacher’s concern in this text is the spiritual drift, what might be some early warning signs of spiritual drift?

It’s probably easiest to point to things like church attendance and participation in church events—and certainly he’s concerned about that, too (10:24-25)!

But what are other signs?

Try to point the class toward questions like these: Is a person living with a confidence that God is still living and active? Are they reading scripture? Dwelling on the presence of Christ? Focusing on a world that will NOT be rolled up like a robe or changed like a garment (1:12)? Enduring suffering and hardship with a confidence in the presence of God? Celebrating God’s being and salvation through worship?

A Word Is Worth 1000 Pictures

Running With Perseverance #3

Focus Text: 2:5 - 3:6

Note for Teachers:

We have seen that the preacher launches his “word of exhortation” by pointing to the grand story of Jesus (1:1-4). Then with a powerful gathering of scriptures, beginning in Psalm 2 and ending in Psalm 110, he shows that the exalted Jesus is far beyond angels or any other created being (1:5-14). It’s like a ticker tape parade, celebrating the enthronement ceremony as the human Jesus, raised from the dead, returns to God’s throne room to sit at the right hand of God.

All seems well, except . . . we are well aware that chaos and death are all around us. How can that be if Jesus has conquered?

Invite your class to dwell on Psalm 110:1, the last of the Old Testament quotations in chapter 1:

*Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.*

Have you ever thought about that little word “until”? If Jesus has conquered death and been seated before God, then why is there any delay in making God’s enemies a footstool for his feet?

This is the long delay. The “long until.” Our passage today, fresh from the ticker tape celebration, dives into the world we know—a world stained with tears.

Psalm 8:4-6

How did Jesus wind up with this exaltation to the right hand of God’s throne? He now traces the path that lead through suffering to glory.

God has never intended for the “world to come” (the new creation of Isaiah 65 and Revelation 21) to be subjected to angels. Rather, he has subjected both creation and new creation to humans. (As he has already mentioned in 1:14, angels are meant to serve the heirs, but they are not themselves “those who will inherit salvation.”)

Now he turns to Psalm 8:4-6, introducing it with “but there is a place where someone has testified”:

*What is a human that you remember him
or the son of a human that you care for him?
You made him a little lower than the angels;
you crowned him with glory and honor;
you subjected everything under his feet.*

Side note: modern translations “*strive, for very good reasons, for a gender-inclusive translation of ‘man’ (‘human beings’ NRSV) and ‘son of man’ (‘mortals’ NRSV).* In this case, however, the translations obscure something that the preacher found significant, namely the phrase ‘son of man,’ which he read as a signal that the psalm said something about Jesus in particular” (deSilva).

In this Psalm, the preacher finds more than just a statement about the glory of humans (as in Psalm 8). He finds words that express this truth: that the exalted Jesus is the first human to rule over all creation! For a little while he was lower than the angels, but now he is crowned with glory and honor! What God always intended has come about: a human, Jesus, is now over all God’s creation.

And “in subjecting everything to him, God left nothing unsubjected to him” (2:8).

But We Don’t See

But this is where the looming “until” of Psalm 110:1 comes in. “But now we do not yet see everything that has been subjected to him.” If Christ conquered, and was raised, why is the world still in the condition it is?

We have to appreciate his honesty here. He knows that his people have experienced social dislocation. They’ve been harassed and persecuted, ridiculed and discarded. All these years of following Jesus, and yet it didn’t seem like things were subjected to him!

We, too, can appreciate this frankness. With churches declining, children leaving faith, with disease and seemingly unanswered prayers, with “war and rumors of war” surrounding us—along with our own experiences of suffering!—we wonder at how unredeemed everything seems. We bear in our Christian community the accumulated losses of our lives.

The faith crisis for them, and perhaps for us, is that we think we need to see things to believe them. “Seeing is believing,” after all. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

But in Hebrews, a word is worth a thousand pictures. Faith is “assurance about what we do not [yet] see” (11:1). All through the book, we meet a God who

speaks—in fact God is called “he who speaks” (12:25)—and we have learned to trust his word even when we don’t yet see.

We See Jesus

But what we do see now is Jesus (2:9). He is the one who was made lower than the angels for a little while but is now exalted above the angels and all creation as God’s Son.

What God has done in Jesus (moving from suffering to the perfection of glory), God intends to do for all his people. In this sense, Jesus is the “pioneer” of our salvation (v. 10). He forges a path that we will follow if we continue on the journey. Suffering is a part of the great “until” —but it has the hope of perfection, of glory, all along the way!

Perhaps note that the same word for “pioneer” (*archēgos*) appears in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe the spies Moses sent ahead into the land (Numbers 13:2-3). What parallels can you find?

The preacher allows his listeners to find great hope and assurance even in the midst of their difficult situation. They can persevere if they keep their eyes on Jesus, the one who traveled the road of suffering, through death, to God’s glory. He is, after all, leading “many sons and daughters to glory” (2:10).

“Discipleship will often mean embracing some kind of loss or deprivation. This may involve turning away from the pleasure or sense of security that comes from some sin, from economic exploitation to emotional manipulation to sexual indulgence. It may involve taking a stand that will invite ridicule, confrontation, or the loss of a job or property, even—as is regularly seen in several countries in Africa and Asia but also occasionally in the West—loss of freedom and life itself. It may involve turning away from the destiny we have chosen for ourselves and the temporal benefits that it brings and accepting a new call upon our lives from God. Whatever losses we incur as we respond to God, however, the eyes of faith, looking to Jesus, perceive ‘glory’ in the presence of God at the end of the journey” (deSilva).

Because Jesus came to share our humanity, we enjoy the status of being his “brothers and sisters” (v. 11). Then the preacher puts the words of Psalm 22:22 in the voice of Jesus:

*I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the assembly I will sing your praises.*

What a thought! Next time you're singing in the assembly, listen carefully. You might sense that there is One Other who is singing praises at the top of his lungs, singing alongside his brothers and sisters.

Slavery to Fear of Death

Not one to tip-toe around hard facts of life, the preacher points out that we are “held in slavery by [our] fear of death” by the devil.

As Richard Beck has written (in *The Slavery of Death*): “The fear of death gives the devil moral traction. . . . Death saturates our work, our worldview, our identity. Everything is held in bondage by our slavery to the fear of death.” He notes that death anxiety causes us to act selfishly and violently—from small acts of self-interest to genocide.

But Christ, in his death (and resurrection) has conquered death! No wonder the preacher ended his “word of exhortation” with one last Old Testament quote (Psalm 118:6, 7):

*The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me?*

With exodus language, the preacher emphasizes that we have been delivered from this slavery to death. The one who shared in our full humanity has led us out of this “Egypt.”

This merciful and faithful high priest (a theme that will take up most of the middle of the book of Hebrews) made atonement for sins and is now helping “those who are being tempted” (2:17-18). He intercedes for them (7:25), anticipating the day when they will be brought to glory.

Based on this assurance, we have another “therefore”: “Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest” (3:1). We keep our eyes on this pioneer, this apostle, this high priest—who was consistently faithful to God.

Four Perspectives

First, this text offers a new way to understand death. It insists that we don't have to live in slavery to death, knowing that we follow the path of our pioneer (2:10) and forerunner (6:20), Jesus. We live in confidence that the final enemy to be defeated is death (1 Corinthians 15); that in God's new creation, there will be no more crying and death (Revelation 21:3-5).

Second, we find a new understanding of suffering. We are, in a sense, sharing in the sufferings of Christ. We are being slowly transformed, filled with hope of the life ahead. As Francis Weller wrote, “God is metabolizing suffering into something sacred and beautiful.”

Third, we are hearing hints of a new way of understanding community. We are brothers and sisters—loved and strengthened by our brother, Jesus. We aren’t alone! (Later he will point out that we should encourage each other daily [3:12] and stir one another on to love and good deeds [10:24]).

And fourth, we anticipate a much fuller understanding of faith that he will provide later. Our confidence is in what we hope for but do not yet fully see. We will follow the way of Jesus: from suffering and death to being crowned by God. And THEN, we will actually see all things subjected to him.

The Journey

Running With Perseverance #4

Focus Text: 3:7 - 4:13

Note for Teachers

This week's lesson contains both warning and assurance, which is typical of the book of Hebrews. Note, e.g., the end of our previous text:

“And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory” (3:6).

Hebrews is replete with words of confidence (*parrēsia*: 3:6; 4:16; 10:19, 35) and hope (3:6; 6:11, 18, 19; 7:19; 10:23; 11:1). But it's also a book unafraid to issue a warning (see, especially: 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 6:4-8; 10:26-31) for those who turn away (i.e., depart from the faith).

Today, we follow the preacher as he both assures and warns with words that are “thick with memory” of Israel's story (Richard Hays).

The Wilderness Wandering

Especially important in Hebrews is the period of history we know as the wilderness wandering. Eventually, he will speak about the “tabernacle”: note, not the temple, but the tabernacle that was set up during the wilderness time. He pictures us as people on a journey (11:8-16; 12:1-3), who have the promised land of God before them.

Invite class members to recall songs they know which recall the time of wilderness wandering as the Israelites moved from Egypt to the land of promise. Examples:

*Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, Pilgrim through this barren land
I am weak, but thou art mighty, hold me with thy powerful hand;
Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more
Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more.
Open now the crystal fountain, whence the healing waters flow;
Let the fiery, cloudy pillar, lead me all my journey through;
Strong Deliverer, be thou still my strength and shield:
Strong Deliverer, be thou still my strength and shield.*

*Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by thy help I've come.
 And I hope by thy good pleasure safely to arrive at home.
 Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God.
 He to rescue me from danger interposed his precious blood.
 O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be!
 Let thy goodness like a fetter bind my wandering heart to thee.
 Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love.
 Here's my heart, o take and seal it.
 Seal it for thy courts above.*

*On Jordan's stormy banks I stand, and cast a wishful eye
 To Canaan's fair and happy land, where my possessions lie.
 I am bound for the promised land, I'm bound for the promised land
 Oh who will come and go with me?
 I am bound for the promised land.*

*To Canaan's land I'm on my way,
 Where the soul of man never dies;
 My darkest night will turn to day,
 Where the soul of man never dies.*

At times, scripture looks back to the wilderness wandering as a time of affection: when God tenderly instructed his people in their youth (Jeremiah 2; Hosea 11). At other times, it is a period when God's mighty acts were evidence (Psalm 105). And at still other times, the focus is more on the stubbornness and rebellion of the people, who often chose not to trust God (1 Corinthians 10:1-5).

We enter our text remembering that we are on a journey. We're invited to run the race set out before us. We recall that the early Christians were called "The Way."

The Warning (3:7-19)

The preacher's next major text is one that looks back to the wilderness: Psalm 95. We are much more familiar with the first half than the second half (which he quotes). Here are familiar Christian songs from the first half:

*Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord;
 Let us shout aloud to the rock of our salvation.
 Let us come before him with thanksgiving
 And extol him with music and song.*

*Come, let us worship and bow down,
 Let us kneel before the Lord, our God, our Maker
 Come, let us worship and bow down,
 Let us kneel before the Lord, our God, our Maker
 For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture,
 And the sheep of his hand, and the sheep of his hand.*

No wonder we prefer the first half! But the preacher wants his people to see the dangerous example set by rebellious people of Israel. “To whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed?”

It’s essential to remember: the deep problem was their “evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.” The “unbelief” (v. 19) was, in other words, not some intellectual failing. Rather, it was a rebellious heart that left God. The issue isn’t whether we ever sin or whether we misunderstand some matter of doctrine. No, it’s about our allegiance to Jesus. Will we persevere? Or will we drop out of the race? The call here isn’t to moral perfection but to persevering faith!

Note right in the midst of the warning is the antidote to faithlessness: community! “Encourage one another daily.”

“When the author told his congregation to encourage one another each day, he was asking them to implore one another with costly regularity until the end of time, when the unshakable kingdom of God will stand glorious in the midst of the rubble of that which will need to be removed. The way to avoid apostasy before this time might just be to gather over casseroles.”
 (Peeler)

What stories might the class provide of a time when they were given strength by the encouragement of others?

The Assurance (4:1-11)

Now the preacher points to a “rest” beyond what Joshua promised: a full participation in God’s own rest. He opens and closes this section with words of exhortation:

“Let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it” (v. 1)

“Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience” (v. 11).

What an encouraging word! Even though there is suffering and discord in our lives at times, we follow the pattern of Jesus. We look forward to full entrance into the rest which God provides. *“There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God”* (v. 9).

The Living and Active Word (4:12-14)

The preacher has taken a passage of scripture (Psalm 95) that was hundreds of years old—one that spoke of events hundreds of years before it was written.

And yet, that old text about even older stories still spoke afresh to his people. No wonder he exclaims: *“The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart”* (4:12).

This is why the church refuses to come unmoored from the words of scripture: these inspired words guide, admonish, instruct, and encourage!

“Whether Old Testament or New, the Bible is Holy Scripture for the church. It is God’s living word, till kingdom come. It is nourishment for our ears—a verbal bread—just as the Eucharist is nourishment for our mouths—a visible word. In both, Christ proclaims his gospel: to the church and, through her, to the world. In both, we are fed as we await his return: manna in the wilderness, on our long march to the promised land.” (Brad East, *Letters to a Future Saint*)

(Perhaps close by inviting someone to describe how an old text—one they’ve read many times—spoke to them afresh recently.)

Growing Up

Running With Perseverance #5

Focus Text: 4:16 - 6:20

Note for Teachers

The preacher is ready to explore the high priesthood of Jesus, digging into the connection with the order of Melchizedek (4:14 - 5:10). However, before he can press on very far, he pauses to chastise them about their failure to grow in their understanding of the Christian faith. Right in the middle of discussing how Jesus can be a priest despite not being descended from Levi (Hebrew 5:1-10; 7:1-28), he interrupts to issue a pointed challenge (5:11-6:20).

He wants them to “move beyond the elementary teachings” (6:1). One of the challenges of every church is to make sure that people aren’t just settling for a shallow faith that is a mix of popular psychology and theology lite.

The Great High Priest (4:14-5:10)

Here the preacher begins a central understanding of Jesus: that he is the great (human) high priest who provided a sacrifice for sins and who intercedes for us before God. This section will take us through the middle of chapter 10. Notice how the opening and closing paragraphs issue challenges to approach God’s throne with confidence:



(4:14 - 10:25)

<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; margin: 0;">4:14-16</p> <p style="text-align: center; font-style: italic; margin: 5px 0;">Therefore, having a great high priest Who has passed through the heavens Jesus, the Son of God, Let us hold fast to the confession Let us draw near...with boldness</p>	<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; margin: 0;">10:19-25</p> <p style="text-align: center; font-style: italic; margin: 5px 0;">Therefore, having... a great priest ...through the curtain... By the blood of Jesus Let us hold fast the confession Let us draw near with a true heart</p>
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The humanity of Jesus is explored through this text, focusing both on his common experiences (one who can empathize with our weaknesses, who was tempted in every way) and on his uniqueness (“yet he did not sin”). He went through the wilderness journey as a faithful Son: tempted, tested, yet relentlessly obedient to his Father.

During his days on earth, Jesus “offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.” It’s hard not to hear echoes of Gethsemane in this paragraph, though as deSilva points out:

“The preacher, however, may not be thinking of a single incident in Jesus’ life but of the quality of the whole, over the course of which Jesus had many occasions to wrestle with God in order to find the strength to commit to moving forward—a life of ‘learning obedience through what he experienced.’ . . . It is important for us to notice in this regard that Jesus’s endurance of suffering is not the result of his prayer being deficient or God’s being absent. Jesus models how to pray with a view to persevering through suffering and difficulty, not with a view to escaping it.”

Jesus suffered; he persevered; he died. But then God perfected him (5:9), raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand. Now, he can continue his role of intercession as a “high priest in the order of Melchizedek” — a theme he picks back up (7:1) after a warning and a promise.

But before moving on, perhaps pause and ask what connects most deeply from these opening words about Jesus. Is it his ability to empathize with us? His sinless life? His prayer life (“with fervent cries and tears”)?

Don’t Be Lazy (5:11-6:12)

The exploration of the priesthood of Melchizedek and the Psalm 110:4 is going to take some concentration, some depth, some eagerness—which the preacher is fearful they may be lacking. So before he takes a deep dive, he issues a warning, a rebuke.

“About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become sluggish in hearing” (5:11, NRSV).

Well, that’s blunt! It’s the kind of comment that might cause a preacher to have lots of angry conversations in the lobby after worship!

He could have mentioned that it’s hard to explain because it’s deep, because it’s unexplored territory, because you have to have a pretty wide contextual knowledge of the Old Testament.

But instead, he said it’s hard to explain because they are “sluggish in hearing”—his first direct criticism of them in the book. He uses the Greek word *nōthros*, which means “sluggish, lazy, dull, languid.” It appears only twice in the New

Testament: here, and then again in 6:12, where he tries to sound more positive: “we do not want you to become lazy” In other words, he thinks they’re up to the task of becoming diligent (6:11) in their pursuit of Christian teaching and living.

By now, many of them should be capable, devoted teachers of the word. Rather, they have become satisfied to be infants. They are happy with milk when instead they should be craving solid food, which is for the mature (5:12).

They need to press forward in their grasp of the Christian faith, building upon the initial teachings and being “taken forward to maturity.” The six basics he mentions—repentance, faith, instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement—were vital instructions at their conversion. But they needed to keep progressing in their listening and living!

The Warning and Assurance (6:4-12)

This difficult passage is one of the stern warnings in the book. First, a reminder: this isn’t speaking about someone who is weak—even someone who is an infant who just wants milk. Rather, it is speaking about those who move from weakness to absence. It’s a warning that people who aren’t growing might one day just turn away from the Christian life altogether.

This caring preacher believes they have faith and salvation (6:9; 10:39); however, he knows it’s his job to remind them that there is such a thing as a precipitous cliff of apostasy—a cliff one approaches an inch at a time.

He gives four descriptions of those who could depart: they had been enlightened, had tasted of the heavenly gift, had shared in the Holy Spirit, and had tasted of God’s word and the age to come. The warning: if they leave, it will be impossible (from the human side) for them to return.

But, he believes in them! “We are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation” (6:9). He even addresses them with the endearing term “beloved” (or “dear friends”). The flashing yellow light is not because he is angry at them or because he thinks they’re a lost cause. It’s the warning of love.

He’s well familiar with their work and with the love they’ve shown to their brothers and sisters (6:10). He is just asking them to set aside the kind of lazy hearing habits that might lead them further astray. He insists that they will through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

God's Promise (6:13-20)

Now he develops further this promise—a part of the language of certainty that is woven through the book.

On “the promise” in Hebrews, see 4:1; 6:12, 13, 15, 16; 7:6; 8:6; 9:15; 10:23, 36; 11:9, 11, 13, 17, 33, 39; 12:26.

The promises of God—including the promise of entering into his rest (4:1)—are grounded in the very nature of God, of a God who cannot lie. By two unchangeable things (God's will and God's oath), we have assurance: a hope set before us.

This hope is an anchor for the soul, firm and secure—just what people who are starting to drift (2:1-4) need! This hope takes us “behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf.”

Which brings us back to . . . Melchizedek!

Access

Running With Perseverance #6

Focus Text: 7:1 - 10:31

Note for Teachers

In 5:11 the preacher warned that what he wanted to talk about was going to be “long and difficult.” So buckle up: we’ve finally come to that part of the book of Hebrews. The preacher explores vital texts like Psalm 110:4, Jeremiah 31:31-34 (the longest quote of an Old Testament passage in the New Testament—which bookends much of the section [8:8-12; 10:16-17]), and Psalm 40:6-8 (among others).

Honestly, this is where so many people get lost in Hebrews—with memories of the tabernacle and sacrifices and Melchizedek. It would be helpful to do a view from 35,000’ to help class participants grasp the center claim and the encouraging word that goes with it.

Keep in mind that there are exhortations in the very beginning (4:14-16) and at the end (10:19-25). So we at least know what he hopes to accomplish by this part of his message. Below are two special emphases to underscore.

Emphasis #1: Access and Gratitude

First, this long section is intended to provide certainty, boldness, and hope for struggling believers. The point isn’t that they’re tempted to “go back” to Judaism. (There is no evidence for that in the book.) Rather, they are encouraged (1) to understand that Jesus has an ongoing priesthood and is making intercession for them before the throne of God; and (2) to respond in gratitude by “drawing near to God.”

Trace the word *proserchomai* in Hebrews: 4:16; 7:25; 10:1, 22; 11:6; 12:18, 22. Rather than “shrinking back” or “turning away” (3:12; 6:6; 10:28f), they are encourage to come before God, knowing that their high priest has given them full access to God. Compare another word (*engizō*) which means “draw near” in 7:19 and 10:25.

In what ways does God invite us to draw near to him? How might that inform our prayer life? Our worship? Our daily lives before God? Though the grace of God is evident throughout the Old Testament sacrificial system, it does seem like there were many boundaries and barriers and separations. Through Christ, however, we have been invited into the presence of God (and of other believers)!

*“While [those served by levitical priests] may have been cleansed from external defilement so as to survive at some distance from the holy God, they were not cleansed from their interior defilement so that they might come into the very presence of God. The author’s underlying conviction is that human beings were meant, in the purpose of God to travel ‘the way into the holy places’ and be fitted to enter. . . . The new covenant announced by Jeremiah [31:31-34], however, promises the removal of sins from the very memory of God and the implanting of the way to please God upon the human mind and heart. It is the core conviction of the early Church that Jesus inaugurates a new covenant between God and humanity.” (deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude* [2000])*

Emphasis #2: Priesthood of All Believers

In the midst of the dense teaching about Jesus’ high priesthood, we shouldn’t miss that we, too, are invited to be priests in the world.

Our consciences have been cleansed from acts that lead to death “so that we may serve the living God” (9:14). (Note: he uses a word that carries the idea of liturgical service to God. See also 12:28—“and so *worship* God acceptably”) Our whole lives become a service to the God who is very much alive—in our worship, our confession, and our acts of doing good (13:15-16).

Hebrews has the same perspective as 1 Peter 2:9: that we are all priests in the service of God among the community of his people and in this world.

The High Priest, Jesus

Before exploring chapter 7, it might be helpful to let the preacher tell us what his main point is:

“Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being” (8:1-2).

Let’s not chase rabbits that take us too far from this central emphasis: we have a high priest who sacrificed himself, was raised from the dead, presented his perfect sacrifice to God, and continues to intercede in the heavenly sanctuary!

Now, about Melchizedek: there just isn't much about him in the Bible. He makes a cameo appearance in Genesis 14:18-20, a story that is remembered later in Israel in Psalm 110:4. Other than that, he is only mentioned in Hebrews. (Note where Psalm 110:4 is quoted in our book: 5:6; 6:20; 7:3, 17, 21.) The early church was well familiar with Psalm 110—110:1 is the most quoted verse in the New Testament!—but he extends further in the psalm to focus on the order of Melchizedek. He's especially interested in showing that Jesus could indeed be a priest, despite not having a levitical pedigree. Like Melchizedek, his priesthood was rooted in the very call of God.

This opens the door to explore ways in which the priesthood of Jesus surpasses that of the levitical priests:

Levitical Priests	Jesus, Our High Priest
Descended from Levi	Order of Melchizedek
Makes sacrifice for own sins	Sinless
Continuous sacrifices	Sacrifices himself once for all
Die	Lives forever



The preacher alludes to the resurrection of Jesus when he says: “what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek *arises*” (a better translation than “appears” in 7:15). His priesthood is based not on levitical genes but on “the power of an indestructible life” (7:16).

His is a more excellent priesthood:

- His is an everlasting ministry guaranteed by God's oath (7:20-21)
- He lives forever to appeal to God on our behalf, to deliver completely those who draw near to God through him (7:25)
- He has no relational barriers, i.e., no sins for which he must first make amends (7:27)
- And he serves in a better sanctuary (8:2-5; 9:11-12, 24)

After exploring the superiority of Jesus' covenant (8:3-13) and the superiority of Jesus' sacrifice (9:1-10:10), he nears the conclusion of this section by echoing the words of Psalm 110:1:

“When this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (10:12-14).

We saw early that Psalm 110:1 has a “long until”: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” But now we know that Christ, having being raised, exalted, and seated at God's right hand, is waiting—just as his faithful followers are waiting for the fullness of his salvation (9:28).

Three Challenges (10:19-25)

Once again, the preacher has provided a nice summary statement of his main themes (10:19-21), followed by three challenges (10:22-25).

The summary:

“Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God”

Then the three challenges for the community (in which he includes himself: “let us”):

(1) *“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”;*

(2) *“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful”; and*

(3) *“Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”*

Non-Shrinking Faith

Running With Perseverance #7

Focus Text: 10:32 - 11:40

Note for Teachers

We come now to the passage that gives us the clearest idea of the circumstances facing the preacher's congregation.

To be clear, many of us in the West don't face the kind of constant social alienation these first century believers did. However, we have many brothers and sisters around the world who do! It might be helpful to keep them in mind as we study this text.

But even with different experiences for most of us, the call to endurance and faith are much needed. There are still many temptations to "enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin" (11:25). We still face the temptation to put our deepest trust in things we can see, collect, and invest rather than in "what we do not see" (11:1).

The Goal: Perseverance

So what is the preacher wanting? It couldn't get any plainer than in 10:36: "You need to persevere!" Hang in there! Stay the course! Stick with it!

We get a sense of what they're up against in their communities by his description of what they had formerly been willing to endure: "a great conflict of suffering." This included being publicly exposed to insult and persecution, suffering with those in prison, and the confiscation of property. While apparently none had yet been put to death (12:4), this kind of rejection and alienation takes its toll!

In v. 38, he quotes Habakkuk, where God says "I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back." And then he expresses his confidence in them: "We do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved" (10:39).

Keep in mind that Habakkuk was a prophet when some of God's people were offended by all the injustices around them in Judah. But when God responds, he says that they need not worry about THAT injustice, because he was sending the Babylonians. Needless to say, that "solution" seemed to complicate the complaints. But the people would have to trust God and wait for his full deliverance:

*“For the revelation awaits an appointed time;
It speaks of the end and will not prove false.
Though it linger, wait for it;
It will surely come and will not delay.”* (Habakkuk 2:3)

Perhaps class participants can offer insights (like those mentioned above in “Note for Teachers”) of why this call to endurance is still vital—even for those of us who don’t face the kind of suffering and persecution that many believers in Africa and Asia do.

How We Endure: Faith

Chapter 10 closes by contrasting those who shrink back with those who have faith. Pressing ahead in the midst of suffering relies on faith—a deep trust in God that overlaps the idea of endurance in Hebrews. This is what Habakkuk had said: “the righteous one will live by faith.” In other words, God’s people will “persevere by faith.”

Then, before launching into what is probably the best known part of Hebrews (the so-called “Faith Hall of Fame” in chapter 11), the preacher offers these words to make sure we understand faith like he does:

“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (11:1).

Notice two things about faith as the Hebrews writer speaks about it: (1) It is pressing ahead despite not being able to see; and yet (2) It remains focused on God’s future—the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem, the new creation when God restores all things.

“Trusting God requires looking beyond what is currently accessible through any of the five senses. Faith is not ‘blind,’ as if the person of faith closes his or her eyes to reality. Rather, people of faith have opened themselves up to larger dimensions of reality than the five senses can grasp. Indeed, only ‘by faith’ can we fathom the many dimensions of reality and make wise choices and commitments, informed by the fuller truth of our existence as not only material but also spiritual beings.” (deSilva)

How We Endure: Memory

But what does this faith look like? Is it even possible to walk by faith and not by sight (to echo Paul’s words), keeping our eyes fixed on the “finish line”?

Yes, he insists. Our whole section begins with the word “remember.”

Of course they were ultimately to remember **Jesus** (a text at the end of this section that will be in the next lesson):

“Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and taste down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (12:1-3).

He’s the ultimate example of enduring even with great opposition, keeping his eye focused on God’s future!

But they also could remember **their own examples** of what this faith looks like: “remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured . . .” (10:32). That was a time when they knew they “had better and lasting possessions” (10:34). They themselves had been a model of what the faith of 11:1 can look like.

But throughout chapter 11, the Preacher offers another source of encouragement: they can remember the **heroes of faith** who had come before them. “This is what the ancients were commended for” (11:2). Note: this isn’t a group of perfect people. We might even be surprised by some of the people included. But they are all people who acted in faith in the face of opposition and adversity. Note that earlier he had challenged them “to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised” (6:12). He picks back up that admonition here with what he calls the “cloud of witnesses” (12:1).

What “qualifies” someone for this list of men and women and faith (since it isn’t lives of consistent, moral uprightness!)? In both the middle and the end, we find his summary statements that link to the description of faith in 11:1:

“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them” (11:13-16).

“These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect” (11:39f).

Like Noah, they acted in obedience even “about things not yet seen” (11:7). Like Abraham, they kept going “even though he did not know where he was going . . . for he was looking to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (11:8-10). Like Moses, they were willing to “be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin” (11:25).

There are so many stories he could tell. In 11:32, he asks “And what more shall I say?” Then he bullet points story after story. Many of the stories had God’s people looking victorious (11:32-35a). But in the middle of this he says, “but there were others.” He shifts to a minor chord and recounts stories of those who were horribly persecuted and seemingly defeated.

And yet, all these people exemplified what faith looks like: they had confidence in what they hoped for; they had assurance about what they couldn’t see.

Further Examples

Now that we understand why these people of faith were listed—not because of perfection but because of their endurance which stayed focused on eternal realities—we can invite the class to add to the list.

Who are others whose names you might add? Who are some men and women whose lives remind you that you can endure in faith?

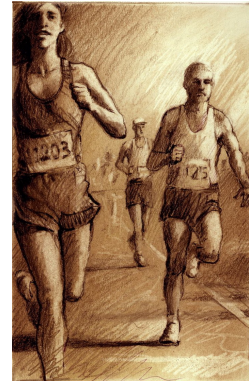
Endurance Athletes

Running With Perseverance #8

Focus Text: 12:1-17

Note to Teachers

The preacher's "word of exhortation" (13:22) continues to plea for endurance, calling on his congregation to "run with perseverance the race marked out for [them]" (12:1), to avoid growing weary and losing heart (12:3), to "endure hardship as discipline" (12:7), and to "strengthen [their] feeble arms and weak knees" (12:12).



Specifically today, we'll hear him cheering us on to the goal by encouraging us to stay focused on our forerunner, Jesus; by seeing suffering and persecution in the context of God's refining love; and by calling on us to take responsibility for others in our Christian community who may be spiritually exhausted.

Eyes on Jesus (12:1-3)

Our text is full of athletic language, drawing from a world where endurance is essential. This is a marathon; a tour de France; a long tournament full of 5-set matches; a swim across the English Channel; an Ironman!

Note some of the words and phrases drawn from the world of athletics and contests:

(1) **Running** - Already he has called Jesus our "forerunner" (6:20). Building on that now, he pictures Jesus as the one who ran the full distance, who "for the joy before him endured the cross, scorning its shame," taking his crown of glory at the throne of God. We, too, are encouraged to run with endurance. Like many who are exhausted, we might identify with the "feeble arms and weak knees" (12:12) that need to be strengthened.

(2) **Race** - The Greek word for race is *agōn* (12:1) — from which we get "agony." (You can almost hear Jim McCay's voice on the "Wide World of Sports": "The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.") It's reflected in 12:4 with the related verb (*antagōnizomai*, which could be used for wrestling): "in your struggle against sin."

(3) **Training** - “. . . It produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for this who have been trained for it” (12:10). We get our word “gymnasium” from the Greek word (*gumnazō*). Like athletes in any sport, we are in training. The resistance (of suffering, opposition, alienation, persecution) is building up our muscles of righteousness and peace.

(4) **Struggle** - earlier, he referred to their “struggle” (10:32) - our word “athletics” comes from the Greek word *athlēsis*.

Imagine standing along the course of a marathon, perhaps right after runners crest “Heartbreak Hill” at Boston, and seeing weary runners. Will they continue? Will they be able to finish the race? Was their training sufficient? Will they find encouragement from others?

For those of us running this Christian race, we have quite a crowd. Surrounding us in the stands is the “great cloud of witnesses.” These aren’t people who read about a marathon and decided to come out to watch; rather, these are the “ancients” of chapter 11 who completed their journey in faith.

And then, most importantly, we have our forerunner, Jesus, the faithful high priest who is now interceding for us (7:25). He is “the pioneer” of our faith in that he went ahead of us, showing us the way; and he’s the “perfector of faith” because he continued to the very city of God. “Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (5:8-9).

“Consider him who endured” (12:3), are powerful words in this context. He faced opposition—just as the recipients of Hebrews are. But he persisted. He hopes that they, too, “will not grow weary and lose heart.” He believes many of them have drooping arms and buckling knees, so they need to find strength that comes from Christ and from their community.

Enduring the How (12:4-11)

Viktor Frankl, a physician who endured a concentration camp in World War II, was fond of a quote (going back to Nietzsche): “We can bear almost any ‘how’ if we only have a ‘why.’” Suffering without meaning can be unbearable.

But now the preacher, admitting that their journey is challenging, wants to help frame what’s happening. He’s encouraging them to think of this suffering less as punishment and more as a critical part of their formation.

He draws from Proverbs 3:11, 12:

*“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”*

The text isn’t attempting a theodicy (justification of God in the midst of suffering); rather, it’s putting their struggles in the context of family love and formation. This isn’t about the cause of suffering but about the ways in which God is forming us through the suffering that comes—especially, in this context, the suffering from society’s resistance.

“This citation of Proverbs is not a blanket statement that all suffering is educative but specifies God’s knowledge of and power over their particular situation. By portraying God as the one who disciplines, reproves, and even whips them, the author places God in the midst of their difficulty. Not as its cause—the ultimate problem is sin; this is what they are fighting against (v. 4)—but as its Sovereign. . . . God is not distant, simply watching the child struggle; God is in the ring with the child, allowing and shaping the blows so that they do not destroy but only strengthen. . . . God, at times, permits what is unjust but uses it for the good of the sufferer. God’s complete knowledge and trustworthiness assert that God’s use of discipline will never succumb to anger or foolishness.” (Peeler)

While we want to be sure we don’t collapse all suffering into the same thing—there is a difference between severe persecution and battling an illness, e.g.—there is an insight here that is common: sufferers are often able to look back and reflect on how God shaped them through their loss, pain, and suffering. Perhaps class participants can share testimonies to this effect.

See to It (12:14-17)

Perhaps you’ve seen a race in the Special Olympics where the athletes stop to help someone struggling—because friendship is valued above winning. Similarly, the goal of this race isn’t to beat everyone else; it is to finish together!

In our final paragraph, we hear the preacher urge us to take responsibility for one another:

“Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy.”

“See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and define many.”

Already, we’ve heard him insist that we watch out for our brothers and sisters (see, e.g., 3:12-13; 4:1, 11). What does it look like for a church to take this responsibility seriously? It seems to be a job for more than just the formal leaders; rather we are all asked to help others.

What we want to make sure is that no one makes the decision Esau did (Genesis 25) when he sold his inheritance rights for a single meal. As Tom Long put it: “When they were handing out T-shirts for the big marathon, Esau was in the chow line and missed the race”!

Esau traded something extremely valuable for something temporary—just as the congregation’s temptation when they are growing weary and losing heart (12:3) was to swap the eternal for the temporary. Out of love and conviction, we must “see to it” that no one drop out of the race!

What Happens in Worship?

Running With Perseverance #9

Focus Text: 12:18 - 13:25

Note to Teachers

In this final lesson, we come to a climactic part of the “word of exhortation” (12:18-29), followed by a series of challenges to live out faithfully the call of one who is following the pioneer of our faith, Jesus (13).

Even though the preacher has identified with the recipients throughout the book (especially in the “let us” exhortations), he is away from them at the time. “I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon,” he asks them (13:19).

In this final session, we have a chance to point to the kind of urgency he has that believers hold firmly to their confidence and the hope in which they glory (3:6), to make every effort to enter God’s ultimate rest (4:11), to approach God’s throne of grace with confidence to receive mercy and grace in their time of need (4:16), to focus intently on Jesus so they will not grow weary and lose heart (12:3).

Tale of Two Mountains (12:18-29)

The preacher picks back up his language of the people of God on a wilderness journey (cf. 3:7-4:13). They have come before a mountain!

First, he points out that they haven’t come to Mount Sinai—a place that was “so terrifying that Moses said, ‘I am trembling with fear’” (12:21).

Instead, they have “come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” Note that their journey has brought them “to” the mountain; they have not yet fully ascended the mountain:

“The proclamation that you have come to Mount Zion affirms their close proximity to the joyous divine, practically manifest in the access they have to God’s throne now (4:16). At the same time, their arrival at Mount Zion serves as an affirmation of what is left to come. It seems to me that the author portrays them at the bottom of the mountain, not on top of it. They have not yet finished their race (12:1-2). They have not yet become fully mature and perfect (5:11-14). Hence, they have not yet ascended, and cannot do so until they finish their struggle with sin (12:4) and dwell in God’s presence as the faithful of previous generations do now and as all

generations will do after the general resurrection. Being close to the presence of God on the mountain, an awesome presence to which they are invited to come nearer, gives them great encouragement but also healthy challenge to keep going.” (Peeler)

Though more awaits on their journey, even now they have come to the very presence of God in their assemblies.

Earlier he mentions that some are developing the bad habit of failing to meet together with other believers (10:25). It’s not hard to imagine that they found these gatherings unimpressive—unlike some of the mystery religions they were familiar with.

Perhaps many today can identify: in Christian gatherings, they aren’t really feeling anything. Mountaintop experiences are few and far between. Installing a new sound system, altering worship styles (as needed as these may be at times)—nothing seems to change how they’re feeling!

What we need, according to the preacher, is to have our spiritual eyes opened to see what is happening in the deepest realities when we assemble.

When we meet with the saints—whether it’s with thousands or with just a handful—this is what’s happening:

(1) We are gathered with “thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly.” This is the only occurrence in the New Testament of this Greek word (*panēguris*), which refers to a festive gathering. When we pray, commune, sing, and read scripture, there is a heavenly party!

(2) We are with “the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.” It’s a little hard to get an exact count if someone asks, “How many were in worship this morning?”—because we are in a sense gathered with the universal church!

(3) We have come to God, “the Judge of all.” Of course! It’s easy to forget that in worship we are in the very presence of the one before whom nothing is hidden—yet who provides us with mercy and grace (4:13, 16).

(4) We’re worshiping alongside those who have already died and who are already in the presence of God: “the spirits of the righteous made perfect.” Though they are not yet in their resurrection bodies (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:8), they are safe in the presence of God.

(5) We have come to “Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”

In light of this, how could we possibly turn from the One who speaks (12:25)? As prophesied by Haggai (2:6), God will one day “shake” all creation, setting all things right. All will be shaken and changed. God will transform all that has interrupted our lives with him and with one another!

For class discussion: How might this wonderful vision of Christian worship impact our assemblies? In what ways can we encourage each other to draw strength for the journey from seeing “more than meets the eyes”? Can you describe a time when you sensed that you were, indeed, part of this “festive gathering”?

Final Words (13:1-25)

You get a sense that the “sermon” is now over and that the preacher is adding a final word to his people since he can’t be there in person (13:19).

What specifically does the shape of the Christian pilgrimage take? Well, it comes down to some practical things like: having love for one another and showing hospitality (vss. 1-3), along with being free from immorality and greed (4-6).

He urges them to remember their leaders—including leaders of the past (v. 7) and the present (v.17). But especially he wants them to stay focused on the main leader, Jesus Christ, who is “the same yesterday and today and forever” (v. 18). This involves following him “outside the camp” to endure disgrace and shame from their unbelieving neighbors (10:32-24).



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