

HOLY HELP FOR THE HOPELESS WHO FINISH IN FAITH Hebrews 10:32-39

Please review this week's catechism question.

Did you meet anyone new after Sunday worship?

INTRODUCTION

What are some hobbies, interests, activities that once were very important to you, in which you invested quantities of time, thought, money, etc., but which now are of no or little interest? Why did you lose interest?

As you evaluate your own spiritual history does it seem to you that you were more interested in Christ in the past or that you are more interested in him and his salvation now than at the beginning? Why do you think that is?

Most who have been Christians for any length of time will speak with fondness of those early days right after their conversion when knowing Christ and being with his people and talking with others about Christ were pursued with genuine eagerness and joy. But for many, now the flame has grown dim and the activities of the Christian life are attended to in a perfunctory way at best. What is to be done? How do we recover and/or maintain an enthusiastic pursuit of Christ to the end of our days? This is one of the central questions that this letter to the Hebrews is out to answer. In our passage this morning the author is directly addressing the necessity of persevering to the end of your life in faith.

STUDY

1. In v. 32 what does he want the recipients of his letter to remember?

He wants them to remember what it was like in the days immediately following their conversion to Christ, when their hearts were enlightened (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:6).

2. In v. 32 what does he say characterized them?

They endured a great contest of suffering (This is the literal translation. NIV= "you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering.")

3. The Greek word "contest" is the word from which we get "athlete, athletic". How is an "athletic contest" an apt illustration of the Christian life? See Hebrews 12:1-2, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, 2 Timothy 2:5, 4:6-8.

In an athletic contest the competitor disciplines himself or herself to train and then to compete according to the rules. He or she does this because they believe that winning the race, getting the "crown" is worth the effort. The contest has a beginning point and an ending point, just like the Christian life.

4. What does it mean to say that the Christian life is a great contest of sufferings? Compare Luke 9:23-26, Matthew 10:16, 22, 34-39, Acts 14:22, Romans 8:16-18.

If you ran a marathon someone might say to you something like this, "You endured a great contest of 26.2 miles." If you competed in the decathlon in track and field someone might say, "You endured a great contest of ten events." The idea is that the contest is the miles run or the events competed in. So in this phrase the sufferings are the contest. When God made his light shine in your heart he signed you up for an athletic contest that consists of a variety of sufferings, which you have to endure in order to successfully finish the race. The sufferings come as a result of being a Christian, loving other Christians and simply living in a fallen world. You win the race by not quitting. You win the wrestling match by overcoming the sufferings. You lose by being overcome by the sufferings and thus quitting.

5. In the case of these Christians what kinds of suffering did they endure in the first days following their conversion? See vv. 33-34.

Verses 33-34 are a carefully constructed statement consisting of four clauses. The first and the fourth clause are synonymous and the second and third are also. The first and fourth describe suffering that happened to them whereas the second and third describe their response to the suffering of others. The first and fourth clauses tell us that they were verbally insulted and assaulted. They were beaten and thrown into prison with all the horrors that went along with prison in those ancient days. They had their property taken from them and/or destroyed. Then in the middle two clauses we are told they were partners with those who were treated like this. They had compassion on those who were thrown into prison. In other words, when their Christian brothers and sisters were being assaulted either verbally or physically they came to their aid and sought to put their body between their friends and their persecutors. When their fellow Christians were unjustly accused and thrown into prison they petitioned for their release. They went into the prisons to provide food and medical aid and spiritual comfort. They openly identified with those in prison thus putting themselves directly in the line of fire of those who had imprisoned their friends. When people attacked the property of their friends they went to defend it and recover it and if it was all taken they used their own property to replace what was taken. They shared their resources with their brothers and sisters.

6. Why were they mistreated in this way? This is implicit, not explicit.

They were persecuted because they were Christians and they refused to renounce Christ. They also suffered because of their love for their fellow Christians. All of their suffering was due to their commitment to Christ and to his people.

7. How did they endure this suffering and why did they endure it in this way?

In v. 34 they joyfully accepted the confiscation of their property. In other words this endurance was not some detached endurance or a

begrudging endurance. Rather they were full of joy while in the midst of this great contest with sufferings. They were full of joy because they knew that they had better and abiding possessions. Here were men and women who were not intimidated by the risk of identifying themselves as Christians and they were not destroyed by the loss of everything because they knew that what Christ had gained for them by his sacrifice was better and more permanent than everything that humans normally hold dear. They are like people who have their car stolen out of the parking lot of the state office building where they are receiving their multi-million dollar check for winning the lottery. They don't care the car is gone because they are set for life. They are like parents whose child is rescued out of the burning house. They are full of joy even while the house burns to the ground. Our joy is not in the suffering but in the fact that the suffering cannot take what really matters from us. The best thing that can happen to a human being has happened to us, we are loved by God and we will live with him forever. Losing your house or your freedom cannot take God's love away from you and so you can joyfully accept the plundering of your property.

8. What are some ways that being a Christian is leading to suffering in your life? What are some ways that loving other Christians brings suffering into your life? Do you joyfully accept the cost of being a Christian and of loving other Christians? Why or why not?

9. In light of their previous experience what does the author tell them they need to do in the present in vv. 35-36?

They are to “not throw away their confidence” and they are to endure in a life of doing the will of God.

10. This word “confidence” is used four times in Hebrews. It is used in two ways. How would you describe its use in 4:16 & 10:19, remembering the symbol of the limited access into the Holy of Holies under the Law of Moses?

Back in 4:16 we were told that because Jesus is our high priest we should approach the throne of God, which is a throne of grace, with confidence to receive mercy and grace to help us in our time of need. In other words, because Christ is at God's right hand as our high

priest we have the right to enter into the center of all authority and power in the universe and ask Almighty God to give us grace and mercy to help us hold on when we are in trouble. In 10:19 we were told that because of Christ's shed blood and because of his broken body and because of the cleansing, regenerating work of the Holy Spirit we have confidence to enter into God's very presence forever. We who were God's enemies and abhorrent to his holy eyes have now, by the work of Christ, been given the right, the confidence to live as his beloved children forever. Unlike the Jewish people and even the Jewish high priest we have the right, the confidence to enter into God's presence without fear. So, on the one hand, confidence is an objective fact for all who belong to Christ.

11. How is it being used differently in 3:6 and here in 10:35? (Consider especially the context here of their experience following their conversion.)

Rather than referring to an objective right that we have as a result of what Christ has done it also refers to our subjective experience of confidence. In 3:6 the author said that we are his house if we hold fast the confidence we had at first. If we continue to live as Christians we are his house. Here, in this passage, it is clear that "throwing away your confidence" is throwing away the way they lived at the beginning of their Christian lives. They were confident that they belonged to Christ and that they had an inheritance reserved for them in heaven that could not be touched and so they openly and confidently lived as Christians, bearing witness to Christ and loving others no matter the cost.

12. Therefore what is the author telling them not to throw away? How are these two uses of "confidence" connected to each other? What will happen if you do not throw away your confidence (see 11:6)?

The author is exhorting them to not throw away their confident lifestyle and not to throw away their right to live in God's presence forever. If they throw away their confident way of living in the world as Christians they will also throw away their objective right to live with God forever. The two things always go together. William Lane

expresses this in his commentary: "Precisely because he enjoys free access to God through Christ's sacrificial death and heavenly intercessory ministry, he can confidently acknowledge his faith before the world." In other words you can confidently give yourself away in love to God and neighbor without fearing what will happen to you because you are confident that you belong to Christ. Look at the end of v. 35. That's the point. If you don't throw away your confidence then you will receive God's great reward. What is that reward? We saw two weeks ago that the reward is living with God forever in his presence. God himself is the reward. Everyone who confidently trusts in God's faithfulness to be and do all that he promises receives the great reward of living with God forever.

13. What is the "will of God" that Christians must persevere in doing? See 10:5-7 & 10.

Verse 36 says the same thing as v. 35 only in positive direction. We are to persevere in doing the will of God so that we can receive what is promised. The will of God is described earlier in chapter 10. It refers to God's will to save his people through the sacrifice of Christ. It was the will of God to save us by killing his son. Jesus came to do that will. He loved God and loved us by his willing death on the cross. Thus we persevere in doing the will of God when we persist in dying to our demands that life go our way and pour ourselves out in love to God and others, just like Jesus did.

14. What will everyone who endures a lifetime of doing the will of God receive? See Hebrews 4:1, 8:6-12 & 9:15.

The promise is entering into God's eternal Sabbath rest. It is all the promises made in the New Covenant, which are completed in the promised eternal inheritance, which is life with God forever in the new heavens and the new earth.

15. What are some ways you are expressing your "confidence", you are "enduring in doing the will of God"?

16. Does the assurance of receiving the reward and what is promised motivate you in any way?

17. Verse 37 begins with the word “for”. What is the relationship between his exhortations in vv. 35-36 and his quotations from the OT in vv. 37-38?

The author does here in vv. 37-38 what we have seen him repeatedly do in his letter. After making an assertion he then backs it up with a quotation from an OT text. He aims to demonstrate that what he is telling them is not something he is making up but rather an application of what God has said in his word.

18. How do these OT texts (taken from Isaiah 26 and Habakkuk 2) support what he has just said in vv. 35-36?

First, he is connecting “receiving the reward” and “what is promised” with the return of Christ. Second, he shows that persevering in doing the will of God and not throwing away your confidence is synonymous with living by faith. Third he shows that throwing away your confidence and not enduring in doing the will of God is the same thing as shrinking back (You may want to point out that the author uses this verse because, according to v. 25 this is exactly what is happening in this church. Some members have “shrunk back” and are no longer publicly associating with the church). Fourth he shows that not receiving the reward and not getting the promise is the result of God’s displeasure with a person and conversely receiving the reward is the result of God’s being pleased with a person. What pleases God is faith (11:6). Finally, if you read Isaiah 26 and Habakkuk 2 you will see that the context of those passages is that the nation of Israel is under threat of experiencing the same sorts of things listed in vv. 33-34 and thus the author aims to show that it has always been the case that the people of God suffer for being the people of God and therefore must persevere in faith. What is happening to them is not unique or surprising. This has been the experience of God’s people from the beginning.

19. What does he say in v. 39 and why does he say it?

He asserts that he is confident that they and he do not belong to that company of professing Christians who shrink back from Christ and his

church and from a lifestyle of loving others and so are destroyed but of those who have faith and so live with God forever. He has this confidence because of what he has observed in their lives. He has seen the marks of faith in their lives in the past and so he has confidence that they will persevere in faith to the end. He tells them this in order to encourage them to not lose heart but to keep on doing what they are doing.

20. Is this description of the Christian life and of faith surprising to you in any way? Is there any part of this passage that is troubling to you?