

- Christians have sometimes spoken of “once saved, always saved” when speaking of the eternal security of God’s people. How do we understand eternal security and yet take due note of the warning against apostasy?

“Remember those earlier days...” Do you remember? What was it like for you as a young Christian? Were you unstoppable? or were you reserved and private about your faith?

The writer reminds his readers about “those earlier days.” In the face of suffering they had “stood their ground.” They had faced public insult and persecution themselves and had stood side by side with others so treated. They had sympathised with those imprisoned for their faith and had even joyfully accepted confiscation of their property.

These weren’t tolerant “fellow-travellers,” but believers with unashamed commitment and passion. We wonder how it could be that such stalwarts could even contemplate turning back – but then, we haven’t been there. Of one thing we can be certain – we have this letter because they didn’t turn back!

“So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised” (vv. 35-36). Don’t give up! Don’t turn back!

The writer quotes from Habakkuk 2.3-4 (also quoted by Paul in Rom. 1.17). Which will it be – living by faith, or shrinking back? “But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved” (v. 39).

- When have we faced strong pressure to turn back (shrink back) from faith in Christ? What has helped us to persevere in or to return to faith in Christ?
- Hebrews brings us both warning and encouragement. Which motivates and helps us most in persevering in faith? What more can we do to help and encourage other Christians in our society?



Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews

by Peter J Blackburn

## 7. Persevering Faith

Reading: Hebrews 10.19-39

At the end of his great hymn on ‘love’, Paul writes, “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor.13.13).

Each of these three enduring qualities has become seriously distorted in our modern way of thinking.

‘Love’ has become an inward-looking, self-seeking, self-fulfilling attitude – far removed from the committed, outward-looking quality that Paul describes.

‘Hope’ has tended to become mere wishful thinking, rather than solid confidence.

And ‘faith’ – subject of the present study – is pressed to service for our intellectual convictions, whether or not they are translated into life and action.

- We think of “faith” as a specifically Christian term. However, what are some of the meanings of the word when it is used in a secular context?
- Among these secular meanings, which ones come closest to the Biblical and Christian usage?

### No Turning Back

Read: Hebrews 10.19-25.

The opening “therefore” is a very important connecting word. It has been suggested that, whenever we see the word “therefore” in the Scriptures, we need to pause and ask what it’s there for! It always points us to what has gone before.

In the present passage, we recall that the readers were Jewish Christians under strong pressure to renounce their faith in Christ and revert to Judaism. The writer has made it clear that –

- Jesus Christ is God the Son, the sure and final revelation of God the Father;
- Jesus is the sure leader, greater than both Moses and Joshua;
- Jesus has eternal priesthood – a priesthood of a higher order than the Aaronic priests;

- the blood of Jesus is the perfect and complete sacrifice for human sins – offered “once for all” in the heavenly sanctuary; and
- Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant promised by the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah.

“Therefore” – because of all this – “since we have confidence 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, and since we have a great priest over the house of God...” (vv. 19-21). The focus is particularly on our access to the presence of God through Jesus’ perfect sacrifice and his priesthood. Our “confidence” in entering the heavenly sanctuary “is set in contrast with the restrictions which hedged about the privilege of symbolic entry into the presence of God in Israel’s earthly sanctuary” (FF Bruce).

“**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” (v. 22). The invitation was previously given in 4.16 – “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” We have confidence to come (the KJV has “boldness”), but our heart and conscience and actions need to be right.

“That the sprinkling of the heart denotes an inward and spiritual cleansing is obvious; it is equally obvious that our author has in mind the counterpart under the new order of the old ritual cleansing with the ‘water of impurity’, the water prepared with the ashes of the red heifer [9.3ff]... It is not so clear that the washing of the body with pure water is thought of as having a similar analogue in the Old Testament ceremonial, simply because our author does not stress the analogue to this as he does stress the ritual of the red heifer... But the present reality which he has in mind is surely Christian baptism – consisting, of course, not merely in the outward application of water as the visible sign of the inward and spiritual cleansing wrought by God in those who come to him through Christ” (FF Bruce).

- Why can we come into God’s presence with confidence (boldness)? If the new and living way has been opened for us through the body of Christ given for us, why is it so important how we come – sincere heart, cleansed conscience and washed body?

“**Let us hold unswervingly to the hope** we profess, for he who promised is faithful.” (v. 23). Our hope is based on what God has said, on what God has done in Christ, on his continuing high-priestly work... As we continue to depend on God’s faithfulness, there is no good reason to turn back from our confession of faith.

“And **let us consider how we may spur one another on** toward love and good deeds” (v. 24). God means us to be in fellowship so that we can actively encourage one another in translating faith into action. This is highlighted in persecution, but needed by us all as a regular part of our Christian life.

And so that this can happen – “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” (v. 25). “Every opportunity of coming together and enjoying their fellowship in faith and hope must be welcomed and used for mutual encouragement” (FF Bruce).

Isolation from fellowship is never an option for the Christian. John Wesley said that “Christianity is essentially a social religion; and that to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it” (Discourse 4 on the Sermon on the Mount).

- What are the pressures we face that would draw us away from holding unswervingly to our hope in Christ?
- What more should we be doing to encourage one another in faith and to “spur one another on toward love and good deeds”?

## Persevering Faith

### Read: Hebrews 10.26-39

Already in 2.1-3a the writer has issued a general warning – “We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?”

But now the warning is more specific and urgent – “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (10.26-27).

“What he has in mind is that ‘falling away from the living God’ of which he spoke in 3.12, that renunciation of Christianity against which he warned his readers in 6.4-8. To have received the knowledge of the truth and then reject it is to give up the only way of salvation” (FF Bruce).

“How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy [lit. common] thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?” (v. 29) Such a rejection of the grace of God is what Jesus calls “an eternal sin” (Mk 3.29). It is to move away from the possibility of salvation.