

Hebrews 10:26-39
“A Faith That Endures”
December 19, 2021
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Advent IV

Listen now to God’s holy and inerrant word as it comes to us from Hebrews 10:26-39. It also printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to follow along there.

26 For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. 28 Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. 29 How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” 31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

*32 But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, 33 sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. 34 For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. 35 Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. 36 For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. 37 For,
“Yet a little while,
and the coming one will come and will not delay;*

*38 but my righteous one shall live by faith,
and if he shrinks back,
my soul has no pleasure in him."*

39 But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

It is a very difficult thing to follow Jesus. It really is. Being a Christian person, a baptized person, a true follower of our crucified savior is, in many ways, the hardest thing imaginable.

Jesus, for the record, pulled no punches about this reality.

Luke tells us that great crowds were following Jesus because of his healings and his miracles and his teachings, and Jesus turned around and looked those people square in the eye and told them this:

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."

And, shortly after that, Jesus went up to Jerusalem, was abandoned and betrayed by his closest friends, was mocked and scorned and falsely accused, and then finally publicly executed.

I mean there's not a lot of ambiguity in that statement or that action on Jesus' part. He says you must bear your own cross if you are going to follow him.

And then he demonstrates that he is not speaking hyperbolically in any way, because he goes up to Jerusalem to be nailed to one.

I say all this by way of introduction this morning because I want to acknowledge that a lot of us in this room are having a hard time right now.

I mean, I know it's almost Christmas, and you probably came to church today expecting some happy Christmas stuff, but I just want us to be honest for a minute. Many of us are having a hard time. Many of us are suffering.

And I want to be honest about that for two reasons.

First, I want you to know that if you're having a hard time right now, you're not alone. You are surrounded by a group of people who also know how difficult it is to follow Jesus in this world.

You are surrounded by men and women who also know how challenging repentance and faith actually is. And I so encourage you to lean on one another. Don't be afraid to talk about what you're experiencing. Don't be afraid to name what's actually going on in your heart. Don't be afraid to describe your suffering, the cross you are bearing right now.

Because I think you will discover, if you are honest and brave with the people in this room, that you will find recognition and grace and encouragement and prayer. And we all need that from one another.

I also want to be honest about the difficulty of following Jesus in this world because I think that our passage this morning is very very honest about these things as well. I didn't choose this passage today. It's just what's next.

But it is very very honest. It doesn't pull any punches either. And I'm so grateful the Scriptures do that for us.

I'm so thankful that God's word actually names the truth about the difficulties of our lives, because it shows us that even in those hard places, especially in those hard places, God really is with us. And that, for the record, is actually the happy thing about Christmas.

The happy thing about Christmas is that God is with us wherever it is we actually find ourselves - he's with us there. Right there where we actually are.

So let's look at the honesty of God's word today and how it meets us in the place where we are, and calls us again this morning to repentance and faith as we follow Jesus together.

Our passage this morning begins in verses 26-31 with what is probably the most direct warning in all of the New Testament against apostasy, against the danger of a person who has once professed faith in Jesus then hardening their heart and turning from Christ and his church.

And make no mistake, what the apostle is speaking of here in these eight verses is full-fledged apostasy.

I especially want the more tender-hearted of you in the room this morning to hear me saying this, because I don't want you to mistakenly apply these words to yourself.

Friends, in verses 26-31, the apostle is not talking about the struggles with sin that every faithful Christian experiences all of their lives until death.

There is a difference between being a sinner and committing the ultimate sin of apostasy. And the apostle here is talking about those who once profess Christ and then disown him - not once, but in a hardened, consistent way.

Listen again to the Apostle's warning against apostasy:

“26 For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. 28 Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. 29 How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” 31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Indeed, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

In this section, the Apostle is clearly teaching us that God will certainly judge those who abandon the way of Jesus.

So how should we respond to a section of Scripture like this? Two quick thoughts.

First, I think a passage like this most emphasize for us the stakes that are involved when it comes to following Jesus. Jesus says, *I am the way, the truth and the life*, and this means that apart from Jesus there is nothing available for us but darkness, lies and death.

Friends, we’re not playing games here when it comes to Jesus. Christianity is not some interesting religious tradition that you can sort of appreciate parts of while adding it to whatever else you think is important. No, it’s Christ or nothing. And apart from Jesus, we are utterly lost.

Second, I think a passage like this should increase our concern for those whom we know and love who have abandoned Jesus. All of us know men and women who are currently apostate - who once seemed to know Jesus, but have rejected him.

A passage like this should convict us and cause us to ask ourselves - are we really concerned for our lost sibling? Are we praying for them daily? Are we asking for God to be merciful to them and change their hearts?

Are we seeking to do whatever we can to prevent them from falling, unprotected, into judgment? Remember, God is kind and merciful, and anyone who humbles themselves and asks for deliverance from him will be saved.

And then, in verses 32-35, the Apostle turns from his warning against apostasy and he speaks directly to his audience about their current situation.

It is clear that in these verses, the Apostle is writing to this congregation out of pastoral concern. He speaks directly and honestly to them about their situation.

He acknowledges their suffering. He dignifies it. Listen to what the Apostle writes in verses 32-35.

32 But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, 33 sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. 34 For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. 35 Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.

The apostle speaks here of a time when the community to which he writes experienced what he describes as a “*hard struggle with sufferings.*” Indeed, just as Jesus had promised, following in the way of Christ brought suffering on these men and women, even as it does for us.

Their sufferings seems to consist in two primary experiences. First, they experienced being *“publicly exposed to reproach and affliction.”*

We don't know for sure, but it's likely that these predominately Jewish Christians endured both ostracization and ridicule from their former neighbors and family members for their faith in Jesus.

And then, when another group of Christians was imprisoned for their faith, the group of believers to whom the Apostle writes had pity on their brothers and sisters and publicly identified with those were in prison, which led to the plundering and theft of their own property.

So these ancient Christians whom the Apostle addresses in this passage have endured real suffering. They have been mocked and ridiculed, they have been disowned by family and friends. They have lost relationships because of their faith in Jesus and have had those who once loved them turn against them.

In addition to that, they have had their property plundered. Wealth has been taken from them. They have lost houses and possessions and social status. All of it is gone.

But in that context, it's fascinating to me how the Apostle addresses them. He is compassionate, but he does not act as though somehow these men and women are getting a raw deal from God or anyone else.

No, he reminds them that the reason they were able to “joyfully accept” the plundering of their property is because they knew they had a better possession and abiding one - namely Jesus Christ.

This stands out to me because sometimes I think we are tempted to believe that if we suffering in this life as we follow Jesus that somehow God is giving us a raw deal, or God is not keeping up his part of the bargain we made with him.

But friends, that is never the way that the Scriptures talk about what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus told us to expect difficulty and suffering. He told us that to follow him would mean bearing a cross in imitation of his own suffering.

And the Apostles don't talk as though suffering is some kind of anomaly either. Peter, in his First Epistle writes this: *"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed."*

I think we have to be very careful beloved, about what our present culture tells us about our lives.

Because what our culture whispers to us is that if we work reasonably hard and we don't commit any major crimes and we are generally decent to other people, we should be able to expect to accumulate wealth and social status and we should live to be 80 or 90 years old and our kids should have a pretty straightforward and mostly easy time of it. And if somehow these things don't happen, we're getting a raw deal.

Beloved, what I want you to see is that Jesus has made no such deal with you.

No, friends, Jesus has not promised to protect you from suffering. He just hasn't. And so when you suffer, Jesus isn't failing to keep his promises to you.

But what Jesus has promised you is something much better than a suffering-free life. He has promised to be with you in your suffering, and he has promised to redeem and restore for you all that you have lost.

So what is it that we need to continue on in this life, to bear the crosses that Jesus asks us to bear?

What we need, the apostle says, is a faith that endures.

Listen to what the Apostle says to these Christians, and to us, in verses 36-39.

36 For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. 37 For,

“Yet a little while,

and the coming one will come and will not delay;

38 but my righteous one shall live by faith,

and if he shrinks back,

my soul has no pleasure in him.”

39 But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

I think what I love most about these verses is the very honest way in which the Apostle describes our faith.

According to the Apostle, the faith we need is simply a faith that endures. A faith that does not give up. A faith that doesn't solve anything with a magic wand, a faith that does not *do* anything except wait for God to act on all the promises he has made to us.

Friends, sometimes having faith in Jesus is just holding on. Sometimes faith is just clinging to the one thing you know to be true, and saying with Peter in the midst of the chaos of your life, *“Lord, where else can I go? For you have the words of eternal life.”*

Sometimes it's just saying with Mary, even if you don't exactly understand what it is that God is calling you to do or what it is actually going to cost

you, but still saying, *“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.”*

Having faith in Jesus doesn't mean that you have all the answers or you know what's coming around the bend.

Having faith in Jesus doesn't mean that you have it all figured out. Having faith in Jesus means that you are waiting for him, that you are counting on him, and you know nothing you can do can save yourself. That, in many ways, is what faith is.

And that is why I am thankful that Jesus is not only the object of our faith, he is also the one who gives faith to us.

Friend, I want you to hear this.

What you need in the midst of your own particular difficulties and sufferings is a faith that endures. A faith that hangs on. But the good news of the gospel is this. Your faith in Jesus is not something that you produce.

No, your faith in Jesus is a gift that is given to you by Jesus himself.

He is the author *and* the completer of your salvation, and he is the one who makes your faith endure even as he endured his suffering for the joy that was set before him.

Beloved, your faith is not something you muster up.

No, your faith is given to you — just as baptism is given to you, just as the Lord's Supper is given to you, just as the Scriptures are given to you, just as prayer is given to you. All of these things are gifts. Your enduring faith is grace all the way down.

And your enduring faith is given to you in the context of a community where we're all doing the same thing. We're all suffering together, we're all

holding on together, we're all committing ourselves to Jesus and waiting for him. And we're doing it together.

And that is why the Apostle does not say you or I in that last verse. He says "we."

He speaks in this way because our enduring faith is a gift that we receive not as individuals, but together.

Beloved, this is who we are, because this is who Jesus says that we are. Listen again to who we are.

We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but [we are] of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

Indeed, that is the promise of Jesus. And that is a promise we can count on.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.