

“Don’t Shrink Back!”

Heb. 10:32-39

- INTRO. - One of the greatest debates (among scholars) in regard to the Book of Hebrews is the question of who is being addressed. I (personally) believe this is the single greatest factor in how a person interprets this book (especially in regard to the warning passages).
- The other important factor (for interpreting this book) is the issue of whether this is an epistle or a sermon. I believe it is a sermon, and I think that affects how I approach it.
- There *are* (of course) elements that are common to letters of that day (especially in the last chapter) but it does *not* begin like a typical epistle and it reads more like a sermon. Perhaps the best way to say it, is to say that it is a sermon that was sent as a letter.
- But the reason I am pointing this out, is because it greatly affects how you interpret it (especially in these chapters where there are strong warnings).
- Having said that, how do we approach our present passage? It follows a strong warning *not* to apostatize but it seems to be aimed more toward believers than unbelievers.
- Here’s what I believe. I believe this is a sermon, and the author of Hebrews is doing what preachers typically do. Every preacher has to assume that there are those in his audience who are genuine believers, and there are those also who have *not* yet made that commitment to Christ.
- And although he has been strongly warning those in his audience who are in danger of falling away (and becoming apostates), he now broadens things out to include those who are genuine believers as well.
- I think this is very similar to what we saw in chapter 6, where he issued a very strong warning and then came back and said, “But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way.” (6:9)
- He’s going to say something very similar to that in 10:39, “But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.”
- So following this severe warning is a loving appeal *not* to fall away, and it is an expression of confidence that they will exercise genuine faith. This is more of a general statement to the entire congregation (which includes the believers).

- So what we have (in this final section of chapter 10) is a call to faithful endurance, which will be a major theme for the rest of the book. I have entitled this “Don’t Shrink Back” because that is the primary subject of this section.
- For those who are yet unbelievers (and may be in danger of becoming apostates) the message is *not* to fall away from the faith and lose eternal life. For those who are genuine believers (and may be experiencing persecution in some form) the message is to stay faithful to the Lord and *not* to shrink back from taking a public stand for Christ.
- So that’s how I am approaching this, and I see three divisions in this text. There are three things the author of Hebrews admonishes his listeners to do. The first one is:

I. REMEMBER YOUR PERSECUTION (vv. 32-34)

- Look with me at vv. 32-33, “But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly, by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated.”
- The writer of this sermon knew his audience well, and he was aware of a time when they had endured some severe persecution. We don’t know the specific incident he is speaking of, but we know some things about it.

- And the main point is, that they had “endured” through this time of suffering, which is a word that means they “stood their ground.” This is a military term that speaks of remaining on the battlefield instead of retreating.

- And the admonition is, that they will go back and remember those days of victory, where they stood their ground, and did *not* retreat in the face of adversity. He’s going to say that they need to do the same thing in their present circumstances.

- The word that is translated “a great conflict of sufferings” (in the NASB) is a word that has athletic connotations. In fact, it is the Greek word “athlesis,” from where we get our words “athlete” and “athletic.” This emphasizes that their previous experience of persecution had been a great struggle and a mighty contest. But they had endured successfully.

- But before we look at the details of this persecution, I want to point out a couple of things. First, it is interesting to note that the Song of Moses (which the author of Hebrews had just quoted) contains the admonition to “remember the days of old.” (Deut. 32:7) Now he is admonishing his own congregation to do the same thing.

- You know, when you are going through any kind of suffering or adversity, getting a good perspective is a key to gaining victory through it. And sometimes it helps to go back to a previous time of suffering and remember how the Lord carried you through it.

- It helps to go back and remember previous victories and to be reminded of the faithfulness of God. That will help you stand firm in your present trials. Looking back and remembering is always a helpful thing to do.

- But another thing I want to point out (here) is that it is possible that the persecution he is referring to, is the expulsion of the Jews from Rome that was enacted by Claudius in 49 A.D. This incident matches the circumstances we know about that event in history.

- And the reason this is important, is the fact that (if that is the case) it means that this was persecution of Jews, *not* necessarily Christians. If this is (indeed) the case, then that would explain why even unbelieving Jews would be persecuted, and why even those who were still in danger of apostasy would endure this kind of suffering.

- It would explain why they identified with their fellows Jews who were imprisoned, etc. It would also explain why their property was confiscated. If that is the case, then this does *not* necessarily have to be applied to Christian persecution.

- However, (having said that) I think there are some things in this text that indicate it likely *was* Christian persecution – and we are *not* told that this *was* the persecution of Claudius – so it likely points to something different.

- At any rate, we know they went through *some* kind of serious persecution, and in that time they had stood firm. They had endured it victoriously. What did their suffering include? Two main categories: Their own personal suffering and their identification with others who were imprisoned.

- Let's walk through the details of this. First of all, the phrase “after being enlightened” either means “after becoming Christians” or “after being exposed to the truth of the gospel.”

- The word for “enlightened” is “photizo” and it is used one other place in this book. Back in chapter 6 it is used (I believe) to point to those who have been exposed to the truth of the gospel. So (to be consistent) it could very well mean the same thing here.

- But the phrase “knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one” (in v. 34) may indicate that these are those who had been “enlightened” in the sense of becoming true believers in Christ.

- But notice that their persecution had been of a *public* nature. Look at v. 33, “partly, by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated.”

- The word for “public spectacle” is a word that means “to be held up to public shame or ridicule.” The Greek word is “theatrizo” which originally meant “to bring up on the stage.”

- This included two elements: reproaches and tribulations. In other words, verbal and physical abuse. The word that is rendered “tribulations” points to acts of physical violence that accompanied the verbal abuse. O’Brien says, “These acts of violence may have included physical cruelty associated with imprisonment, beatings, and deprivation.”

- Now, we need understand that this did not mean they had suffered martyrdom. In 12:4 we read, “You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin...” They were *not* being put to death (at this point) but they *were* suffering physical violence.

- And (of course) the violence they experienced was likely intended to pressure them to abandon their beliefs or (at least) to deter others from joining them. But these Hebrews were *not* deterred, and they did *not* shrink back from identifying with those who had been imprisoned.

- Look at v. 34, “For you showed sympathy to the prisoners...” (Stop right there.) The word for “sympathy” communicates the idea of being affected by the same suffering or sharing the same emotions as if it was experienced personally.

- They were willing to become “sharers with those who were so treated” (as v. 33 says). Interestingly, he uses a form of the word “koinonia,” which is the biblical term for fellowship. This sense of common bond drove them to sympathize with them.

- This also means that they publicly identified with those who had been put in prison, which put them in danger of being imprisoned themselves. They were willing to risk that in their ministry to those who were suffering in that way.

- They (no doubt) brought these prisoners food, water, and clothing – apart from which they likely would *not* have survived. Bruce explains that “prisoners who had no means of their own were liable to starve unless their friends brought them food and water and whatever other form of help they required.”

- But there was something else. Go back to v. 34, “...and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one.”

- The text does *not* tell us whether this seizure of property was an official act of the magistrates or if it was the result of mob violence. Both were common in those days. Legally, those who were convicted of crimes would have their property seized by the government, but many times unruly mobs would pillage and burn the property of those who were the objects of their anger.

- O’Brien says, “Often...the lines between legal and illegal actions were *not* clear, with illegal seizures being condoned by magistrates.” And (of course) this was a very degrading thing to have all your property seized, and

it also resulted in the loss of livelihood for its victims. It made recovery very difficult.

- But notice that these Hebrews had faced that with “joy.” They “accepted” this “joyfully.” This is a reason to see these as genuine believers (here) because joy is a fruit of the Spirit.

- But the real reason why they accepted this looting of their property with joy is because they knew they had greater possessions laid up for them in heaven. Look at the last part of v. 34, “knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one.”

- They were willing to suffer the loss of their present possessions in this world, believing that they had an eternal inheritance waiting for them – one that is imperishable and will *not* pass away.

- This should be the attitude of every child of God. Whether we ever suffer the loss of all things (as they did) we should hold the things of this world loosely, knowing that the eternal things are laid up for us in heaven – and they are things that will abide forever.

- Notice that there is a play on words in v. 34. The word “possessions” (plural) is contrasted with the word “possession” (singular). The listeners had lost all their possessions, but they had one singular possession that was greater than all that. That singular possession was eternal life in heaven – and it was something that could never be taken away from them.

- It was *not only better* than what they had lost, but it was that which would last for all eternity. And that leads us right up to the second thing the hearers of this sermon needed to do. Not only did they need to remember their persecution, but the author of Hebrews admonished them:

II. RECEIVE YOUR PROMISE (vv. 35-36)

- Look with me at vv. 35-36, “Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.”

- The focus of this second point is that they would receive what has been promised. They knew the promise of the gospel. They knew about eternal life that was promised to those who put their faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

- They also knew enough about Christ to know that He will (in fact) keep those promises. That’s why he said to them, “Don’t throw away your confidence.” You can count on Christ keeping His promises.

- And there is great reward in having that kind of confidence. There is great reward in having the assurance of one’s salvation. And (of course) those who apostatize forfeit that assurance – but even those who shrink back in the face of persecution forfeit it.

- He's saying, "This is like a precious gift. Don't give it up no matter what." He's really saying to them that the boldness they displayed earlier is needed again. The perseverance they displayed when they were persecuted is the same kind of perseverance they need now.

- The word for "confidence" has already been used twice in this book. It has been used in regard to having confidence to enter into the presence of God. He's saying they need that same kind of confidence in the face of their current pressure to turn away from the faith.

- By the way, notice the word "reward" again. That word "reward" is going to appear several times in the next chapter as he talks about the essence of faith. Those who exhibit faith are those who are looking to their reward.

- And, just as their earlier confidence was upon the future, with its "better possession and...abiding one," so here too their boldness should be directed to the "great reward" on the final day. The reward is *not* material or earthly – it is heavenly and lasting.

- But he's saying, "Whatever you do, don't throw that confidence away." He's saying, "You need to show the same kind of confidence you had earlier, when you were willing to face persecution joyfully."

- But notice what he tells them they need. Verse 36, "For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised."

- Verse 35 is the negative side – now he gives them the positive side. "Don't throw away your confidence, but instead persevere." The word for "endurance" points to patience in the face of temptation or testing. It's the familiar word "hupomone," which means "to stand up under." Under persecution, under testing, under trials of any kind – they needed to stand firm and persevere.

- And what will be the result if they do that? Well, first they will go on to do God's will. They will go on and accomplish God's purpose for their lives. They will live by faith and be faithful in service to God.

- But the ultimate result is that they will receive the promise. They will secure that eternal reward. The motif of promise has already appeared in this book. In 4:1 we read, "Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it." The promise of eternal life remains, but you need to make sure you don't come short of attaining it.

- In 6:11-12 he said, "And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises."

- In 8:6 he said, "But now He [Christ] has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises." What are those promises? The promises

of the New Covenant. The promise of complete forgiveness and full atonement for sin.

- In chapter 11 the promise motif runs like a scarlet thread throughout. We'll see it mentioned at least four times in that chapter. It is the essence of faith to cling to the promises of God – and to believe that He will always keep His promises.

- So he says to them, “Remember Your Persecution, Receive Your Promise” -- thirdly he says,

III. RETAIN YOUR PERSEVERANCE (vv. 37-39)

- Look with me at v. 37, “For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay. But My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.”

- Now, it might *not* appear that way on the surface, but these three verses require careful study, because what we have here is (really) very complex and technical. I'm going to try to simplify it for you, but I think it is important that we understand it properly.

- In light of the admonition to have endurance (in v. 36) the author of Hebrews employs a compound quotation from the OT: Is. 26:20 and Hab. 2:3-4. The original OT context refers to the first coming of Christ. It has to do

with the coming of Christ to fulfill God's plan of salvation.

- In this passage the “coming One” is the Messiah. He is also referred to as “My righteous One.” The way we know Him is that He lives by faith and He does *not* shrink back in the accomplishment of God's salvation plan. In other words, He did *not* shrink back from going to the cross for us.

- The author of Hebrews quotes this from the Septuagint instead of the Hebrew text. The Hebrew text focuses on a time of deliverance from the Chaldeans, and the promise is that “it [the judgment of the Chaldeans] will come and not tarry.”

- But the Septuagint focuses on a Person. The Septuagint reads, “If he is late, wait for him; because he will surely come, and he will *not* delay.” Then it says, “If he draws back, my soul has no pleasure in him, but my righteous one will live by faith (or faithfulness).”

- O'Brien explains, “...in the LXX it is not simply for the fulfillment of the vision that the prophet is told to wait for, but for a person...When he appears he will vindicate God's righteousness and put down the oppressor. If he draws back, he will show that he is not God's chosen agent. If, however, he does not draw back, this will be evident that he is indeed God's agent, his ‘righteous one.’”

- So the context of the original text is Messianic. It points to the first coming of Christ. The “coming one” was a clear expression by early Christians for the Messiah.

- But here (in the NT) the *application* is changed to His *second* coming. O’Brien says, “The author of Hebrews has sharpened the messianic interpretation of Habakkuk 2:4 by adding the definite article before the participle...which ‘transforms the messianic potential of the Habakkuk text into a clear messianic reference to the climactic eschatological event of Christ’s Parousia.’”

- That simply means that he altered the text to make it refer to His Second coming instead of His first. And the phrase “yet in a very little while” points to the certainty of this event.

- So (in this context) it means that the time of the consummation of His coming is *not* yet – so we need to persevere in faith until He does. We must *not* shrink back, but practice endurance, waiting for His second coming.

- But the author of Hebrews does something else here. In his quotation of Hab. 2:4, he inverts to two halves of the sentence, so that the “righteous one” becomes the subject of the first two clauses.

- This simply means that he applies the “one who lives by faith” to the believer. In other words, the “righteous” are those who live by faith. We’re going to be told that in

the next chapter (11:4). We’re also going to be told that without faith it is impossible to please God (11:6).

- So in this way, the author of Hebrews has totally re-interpreted these OT texts, and has applied them to his own audience. His message is that saving faith is the way, *not only* to heaven, but to a life that pleases God.

- The emphasis is on the forward-looking character of saving faith (as chapter 11 will make clear). So what this means is that the phrase “my righteous one shall live by faith” now points to the Christian believer whose faith in Christ enables him to endure hardship and suffering in the name of Christ.

- He also re-interprets the concept of “shrinking back” here. In the same way that Christ did *not* shrink back from accomplishing His atoning work, so we must not shrink back from being faithful to Him.

- Certainly this would apply to full apostasy, but it is primarily intended to encourage faithfulness on the part of genuine believers. The warning is that God is *not* pleased with us when we shrink back from following Him.

- And (by the way) don’t get alarmed that a NT writer would re-interpret an OT text like this. We see numerous examples of this in the NT, and we need to remember that they did this under the divine inspiration of the HS.

- And we need to remember that the phrase “the righteous shall live by faith” is quoted twice by the Apostle Paul (once in Gal. 3:11 and once in Rom. 1:17). It was Rom. 1:17 that God used to convert Martin Luther, which started the Reformation.

- It is highly significant that it is quoted three times in the NT – and the point of Paul’s usage of it, is that you have to be saved by faith and *not* by works. A life of faith is a demonstration of the saving faith that produces it.

- The concept of shrinking back indicates a lack of faith – but in v. 39 he expresses his confidence that they do (indeed) have genuine faith.

- Look at v. 39, “But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.”

- Just as he did following the warning of chapter 6, so here (again) he expresses confidence that they will (indeed) demonstrate true saving faith – that they will *not* apostatize, but will embrace Christ and the gospel in full.

- Believing that Christ will soon come, and will *not* delay, he has confidence that they will exercise genuine saving faith that will result in the “preserving of [their] souls.”

- Well, what do we do with all this? How should we respond to this admonition? We are to respond the same way the author of Hebrews is exhorting his hearers to

respond. We must exercise true saving faith in Jesus Christ. We are to persevere in that faith – in fact, we are to *live* by that faith. We are to remember the faithfulness of God in times of trials. We are to look ahead to the claiming of our promises. And we are to hold fast in the face of temptation and testing.

- This is the message for all of us this morning. If you have never trusted in Jesus Christ as your savior – and especially if you are in danger of falling away – you should put your full trust in Him for eternal life.

- If you are already a believer, you should heed the message to remain faithful in spite of any persecution or trial. Next week we will begin to look at the essence of genuine faith. That is how we are to live.

- PRAYER