

Hebrews

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 August 2011

Preacher: Jonathan Worthington

[0 : 00] We're going to be flipping back and forth in Hebrews quite a bit, so there's no particular passage for you to turn to right now, just keep it open to Hebrews.

There's a quote from C.S. Lewis that has a lot of wisdom in it. He has a lot of quotes with a lot of wisdom. He says in an essay called *The Weight of Glory*, he says, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord Jesus finds our desires not too strong, but too weak.

We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot fathom what it is meant by an offer of a holiday at the sea.

We are far too easily pleased. Also, I would add that when we fix our eyes in the wrong place, we are far too easily displeased as well.

The letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament writes to Christians who are a bit like those ignorant children who are fiddling about with lesser things because they've lost their sight of what is greater.

[1 : 43] They're struggling. They're wavering in their faith. They're losing their confidence in the hope that they have. The hope that's offered in the Gospel.

They're losing their confidence in that. And mainly because their eyes are fixed in the wrong spot. So what is the problem exactly that the Christians addressed in this letter are facing?

Let's do a little bit of detective work. We're going to do this together. That's why we're going to flip around a little bit. For example, flip to Hebrews chapter 12. This is how anybody figures out what the biblical books are written about, written to, is what they say.

We can discern what the Christians were struggling with by a number of statements in the letter itself. For example, 12.4 says, In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

He seems to be pointing out simply that they're not martyrs yet. They're not at that point of being persecuted where they're actually spilling their blood in resisting sin, especially the sin of leaving Christ.

[2 : 57] So you're not at that point yet. But just look just before at chapter 10, verse 32 to 34. Verses 32 to 34.

Recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly shamed with insults and troubles, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.

For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you know that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Previously in their Christian life, toward the beginning of it, they experienced a lot of difficulty, didn't they? Public shame, social pressures, insults for being Christians, it would appear.

Even wrongful imprisonment, and people plundering their property because they're Christians. But that was before. That was in the early days of their faith.

[4 : 07] What about now? What are they continuing to struggle with that's making many of them waver in their confidence of the hope that they confess? If you look at, back at chapter 12, verse 2, so we're just really flipping one page back and forth.

Public shame seems to be a dominant theme in this letter. It comes up over and over in different ways. Public shame. For example, look at verse 2, chapter 12, verse 2.

He says, look to Jesus who endured the cross, despising its shame, or its disgrace. Or again in verse 3, he says, consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you

may not grow weary or faint-hearted.

Or again in chapter 13, verse 13, flip one page again if you need to, he says, let us go to him, to Jesus, outside the camp, bearing the reproach or the insult that he bore.

You see, this is a recurring theme. I've only highlighted a few. Shame, public humiliation seems to continue to be a problem for them. And so over and over, this author encourages these Christians, basically, let's put up with this.

[5 : 32] Put up with the shame. Put up with the insults. Put up with all of these sufferings that you're experiencing for Jesus' sake. And so in chapter 10, verses 23 to 25, this is why he tells them, let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering.

For he who promised is faithful. Let us consider also how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as some are in the habit of doing.

Two other statements, he says, let's hold fast to our confidence and our boasting in our hope.

That's chapter 3, verse 6. Hold our original confidence firm to the end.

Chapter 3, verse 14. This is a problem that these Christians are facing. Their confidence and their hope is wavering. It says, hold fast to that. Don't neglect meeting together.

It appears that some people had already left. They got fed up with it. That's enough. Enough insult. Enough shame. I don't want the public disgrace anymore. And they just stopped meeting with the other Christians.

[6 : 49] They began to shrink back, as the author puts it in another place. Due to insults, public shame, disgrace, they began shrinking back, losing their confidence, even letting go of their claims of hope that Christ offers.

But what's the real problem? That might seem, well, it certainly is a real enough problem, the insults and the shame. But a lot of people have put up with shame and insults, even plundered property. They've put up with this, and they've held on to their confidence in the Christian claims. So why are some people wavering, falling away even, giving up, shrinking back?

There seems to be a theological problem in their minds. A theological problem that is stimulated by the suffering, by the insults.

It makes them ask certain questions, and it's how they deal with those questions that's where the problem lies. One commentator wrote about Hebrews, about the Jewish context of their situation.

[8 : 05] He says, within a Jewish context, suffering is often seen as the result of sin, or, at the very least, a lack of blessing of God.

For example, if I'm suffering, humiliation, etc., I'm obviously not blessed by God. I'm obviously not favored by God if I'm suffering like this.

We only need to look, he says, at the book of Job, to see that there was a lively discussion about why people suffer. Think about Jesus' disciples, when they saw a man born blind, and their first response, their first question was, who sinned, this man or his parents, so that he was born blind? If Christians are right, that Jesus has triumphed, then why are his followers not blessed?

Why are they even suffering? So this is a question we need to wrestle with. What is my confidence? What is it based on?

[9 : 15] The confidence in the Christian claim, and in the hope that we do have God's favor, God's blessing, even. What is that confidence based on?

The people didn't only live in a Jewish context, with Jewish ways of thinking. There's also the Greco-Roman world, sometimes very similar in how they thought, sometimes very different. They also lived there. This commentator says, within the Greco-Roman context, the idea of success was very much based on honor and shame.

If one suffered shame and humiliation in public, which these Christians certainly were, as we've seen, then he or she obviously cannot be described as successful.

They're obviously on the losing side of life. So the book of Hebrews addresses a very real question that they wrestled with, and I think that all of us would wrestle with.

[10 : 18] Christianity claims that Christians have God's favor. Not because of any quality in ourselves, of course. Far from that.

But simply because of God's grace in treating us, looking on us like he looks at his own son. Because we're clinging to him in faith.

We have the favor on us that God grants to his own son. And that is staggering. That's what Christianity claims. The followers of Christ have the favor of God.

Christianity claims that God will give to us who follow Christ an eternal inheritance of glory. That's what Christianity claims.

But if so, then why are Christians suffering shame and humiliation and more presently? We should be confident in these Christian claims.

[11:19] But what is our confidence based on? Theirs was wavering. Some had already left because it was too much. The author writes to those who are remaining to strengthen them in their confidence.

You can probably feel the struggle that they were experiencing. It's as if many of them were saying, This life is so difficult.

Is my Christian hope even true? Am I really going to inherit anything? I'm not seeing it yet. Wouldn't I be seeing it if Jesus actually has triumphed?

I'm not seeing any fruit of victory, but the opposite. Being a Christian is not worth it. Not worth all the shame and the humiliation, the insults, the social pressure.

It's not worth it. And so some have stopped meeting together in this letter. They've stopped associating with Christianity altogether.

[12:24] They have cut any public ties or associations with Jesus. They don't want to be associated with him anymore. Many of them seem to be retreating to non-Christian Judaism, which, well, certainly was an accepted religion in the Greco-Roman world, which Christianity was not.

It had certain privileges. It seems, perhaps, therefore, to be safer, not open to as much shame or ridicule. And they seem to be retreating to that, which is why the author spends so much time talking about the Old Testament practices at the temple.

Is it really worth it? Will I ever actually inherit the promises that I hope for? Of course, is it really worth it?

Is really the question, is he, Jesus, really worth it? So, what is your confidence based on? The confidence that you will receive an eternal inheritance of glory with Christ.

What's that based on? So, we could ask, to answer that question, we could ask, well, what does the author of Hebrews offer to remedy the problem that these people are struggling with?

[13:45] What does he say to answer these questions? And the question then comes to us, how do you answer this question for yourself? Many of you might be struggling, wavering, contemplating whether this Christian stuff, and therefore Christ, is actually true or worth it.

Or, if you're not struggling, praise the Lord, but you might know somebody who is. So, how do you answer these very difficult questions? Well, how does the author here, inspired by God, answer them?

Again, a commentator writes that the book of Hebrews is written to reorient, to reorient a community that has been disoriented by this chasm between the Christian confession of triumph, on the one hand, and the reality of suffering.

He's not experienced. So, how does he reorient, or reorientate, perhaps I should say here, these Christians? He does it in three basic ways.

The third is the most prominent, the most important, the central theme, but we're not going to get there quite yet, because he does it in three ways. The first is that he warns them.

[15:02] Throughout this letter are sprinkled very serious warnings for turning away from Christ, for shrinking back from the confession, the public confession of Christ, so that you won't be insulted or shamed anymore.

He warns them, because this is not simply a problem of shifting from one system of religion that doesn't seem to be working for me.

It's not offering what I need, the comfort that I need. It's shifting from that to this other system that has, it kind of fits me better. I can live more at peace in my day-to-day life with this.

It's not simply a matter of shifting from two, I guess, equal options. It's a big problem to turn away from the glory of Christ and the public confession of Him to anything else.

So he warns them. For example, turn to Hebrews 6. This is one of the better-known warning passages. Hebrews 6, verses 4 to 6.

[16:16] He says, It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they then fall away, it's impossible for them to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss, they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and

subjecting Him to public disgrace.

Do you see the connection here? Remember, they're suffering public disgrace because they're Christians. I'm suffering public shame, therefore, Jesus is not worth that.

What that really means is them holding Him up to public shame, because they're announcing to everyone that He's not worth it. Jesus is not worth the insults that I'm facing.

And so, they're holding Him up to public shame. So, the author uses these warnings sprinkled throughout, and so they're there for us to use for ourselves, to be warned about shrinking back from Christ, but also for our friends who are struggling, if it's appropriate at certain times, to offer to them these very stern warnings.

Even warnings such as, speaking of a fury of fire that consumes God's adversaries. That's how serious this is. But, warnings are not the most predominant theme in this letter.

[17:55] They're not the main thing that this author offers to help these struggling Christians. They're there to be used, but they're not the main thing. They're not the primary remedy.

The second thing that he does, again, sprinkled throughout, is he cheers them on to hold firm. He doesn't just warn them about the dangers, but he cheers them on to hold firm, hold fast to Christ. I've already read a few of these. Listen to chapter 3, verse 6. And we are God's house if, indeed, we hold fast our confidence and hold fast our boasting in our hope.

Or 3.14, we share in Christ if, indeed, we hold our original confidence firm to the end. Now, that's a little bit of cheering mixed with a bit of warning.

If we hold firm, this is what's true. But there are some places that are just pure encouragement, cheering them on. So turn to chapter 10, if you're not already there. Hebrews 10, verses 23 to 25.

[19:06] 10, 23 to 25. He cheers them on. They're struggling and he says, let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

Let us also consider how to stir one another up to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some. Or look at verse 32, chapter 10, 32.

Do not throw away your confidence, which has great reward, for you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what God has promised.

So the question that we face is, when I look around, it does not seem like I'll receive what God has promised, and so is it worth it?

And he cheers them on, yes, it's worth it, hold fast until the end and you will receive what he promised. But another question still remains. That doesn't answer the heart of the issue.

[20:19] It helps. And he offers it a number of times, but that doesn't get at the heart. Do you remember the main question? In a sense, somebody could respond, you say it's worth it, you say I'll receive it, you warn me about giving it up, you cheer me on to push through, but how do I know that I'll receive it?

What is my confidence based on for this Christian claim and hope that God's favor and blessings are with us? Warning is important, encouragement, cheering on is important, remember that please for yourself and for those who you know that are struggling, but neither of those are the primary answer to the remedy.

The third thing, and this is what he puts forward in every chapter from the beginning to the end, the predominant theme everywhere, this is what he does, he puts before their eyes the surpassing greatness of Jesus.

He describes Jesus and how wonderful he is over and over again from all different angles, all over the place. That's what he holds up to them as the main remedy for their wavering confidence.

He says, look at Jesus. And this is the theme of the whole letter. You can summarize it in this way, the whole letter of Hebrews. See how great Jesus is, therefore, persevere.

[21:50] you remember the child playing in the slums making mud pies. Well, let's picture two children making mud pies together in the slums.

One kid accepts that offer of the holiday at the beach. He accepts it, but he hasn't yet gone on the holiday. He still is in the slums with his friend. He begins talking to his other friend about this hope. He starts confessing this hope in this coming holiday. The other kid begins to mock him. Look around you. We're in the slums. There's absolutely no holiday.

If that were really true that you were going to go on holiday, wouldn't the one who promised that to you have already taken you out of the slums? You're so stupid for trusting in this.

Look around you. The mocking and the shaming gets intense. The kid with the promise begins to lose confidence in this hope that he has.

[22 : 55] He begins shrinking back from this hope. Beginning to question, is this idea of this holiday actually worth all of this shame and insult that I'm experiencing?

The author of the Hebrews would certainly warn this child about the dangers of saying no to this holiday. He would also surely cheer him on saying keep holding on to that confidence.

You're going to receive that holiday. But that's not the main thing that the author of Hebrews would say to this child. You could sort of put it like this.

It's a bit like this although I'm going to say that it's not exactly like this in a second. But it's a bit like this. The author of Hebrews says focus on how much better the holiday will be than these slums that you're in.

Think about the better. I mean think about the ocean. Fix your eyes on the company, the feasts, the real pies. Think about those. And that helps you cling to this confidence.

[24 : 03] So it's a bit like that and yet not exactly. Because the author, although he does point them to think about the better, it's not merely the beauty of the age to come that he puts before them.

It's the person who guarantees that future. The beauty of the person. He does not exactly say when you're suffering insults and shame or worse, just think about how good heaven will be.

Truly, think about it. That's great. It should encourage you. But that's not the main thing. Just think about how good heaven will be. And I hope that we don't use that, simply use that encouragement for our friends that are struggling.

Don't just think about heaven and all of this stuff here, the difficulties will dim in comparison. That's not exactly it. The author turns us to Jesus himself.

Fix your eyes on Jesus, the one who has secured that better thing for you. The one who suffered for you. The one who was insulted for you.

[25 : 14] The one who died for you. The one who was raised to life for you. And who is now on the throne of the universe, ruling, who guarantees you that better thing.

Fix your eyes on him. Because he absolutely guarantees you that holiday, or as the author puts it, that rest, that divine rest in God's presence.

Contemplate the surpassing greatness of Jesus himself. Therefore, persevere. Now, Hebrews does not exactly answer all of our questions.

A lot of our questions are, why are we suffering? If Jesus has triumphed, why is this happening to me? And he does not exactly give an answer for the why.

But let me ask you, do you remember that question that we're wrestling with? What is my confidence based on? Is your confidence and your faith built on having all the answers to the why?

[26 : 29] Is that what keeps you rooted and anchored? I don't think it should be. It's nice to have answers. But our confidence is not built on having all the answers to why.

Our confidence is built on the one who, in fact, has guaranteed the better. Despite why we are still suffering.

Let me, as I begin to bring this to a close, just a few more moments, let's look at a portion of the passage that Steve read for us earlier because the author highlights some very important things for us.

So this is beginning to conclude things. So bear with me as you turn to Hebrews 2, verses 8 and 9. Hebrews 2, verses 8 and 9.

He's just explained before this that God spoke through the prophets, but Jesus is so much better than the prophets. God also has given angels for various things, and they're great, but Jesus is so much better than angels.

[27 : 44] He's just been highlighting how great Jesus is and he turns us in chapter 2. Look at verse 8. Now, in putting everything in subjection to Jesus, God left nothing outside of Jesus' control.

At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him, but we do see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Do you see what the author said? He said, we do not yet see something, but we do see something different. We do not yet see everything in subjection to him.

He's very honest about that. Look at our surroundings, they look out of control often, don't they? Out of control, but we do see Jesus crowned with glory and honor and everything has been

subjected under his control.

How do we see Jesus crowned with glory and honor? We look at our surroundings and that seems to be all we can see. How do we see Jesus crowned?

[29 : 06] Well, throughout scriptures it becomes very clear that we need to keep two main things in mind that we need to trust in. The reliable testimony of eyewitnesses who did see with their own eyes Jesus raised from the dead and ascend into heaven where he took up his throne.

They watched it happen. They testify to that. But also, the second thing is the scriptures, the Old Testament scriptures that promised that that would happen and the New Testament that explains it happening.

We have the eyewitnesses confirm with their own eyes what the Old Testament said was going to happen. And at the same time the Old Testament describes in greater detail that very thing that the eyewitnesses saw.

And we have that. It's a fact that Jesus arose from the dead and raised up to the throne of heaven. Eyewitnesses have seen it and it's confirmed and filled out by the scriptures that God has given. We see Jesus crowned with glory and honor. And so, the author says, we look to him and we look to him. So what do we do?

[30 : 23] We're suffering. Perhaps you've been insulted, shamed for confessing Jesus. Maybe you know somebody who has or really this fits with any type of suffering. And you're not seeing what has been promised is actually given to you and that's very difficult.

You're not alone in that difficulty. In fact, tonight we're going to contemplate Hebrews 11 which mentions a lot of people who had that very experience. But they lived and persevered by faith despite things not looking like it was working out well.

Do you know somebody, anyone, who has persevered by faith, held unswervingly to that hope despite public shame and humiliation?

Do you know anybody who's faced that? Many of us probably do, a number of people. Again, Hebrews 11 describes a lot of people like that. But do you know anyone who has actually come out with victory, full victory, actually receiving the great reward?

Do you know anybody like that? Before you say no, fix your eyes on Jesus because he is the author, the pioneer, and the completer of the faith.

[31 : 46] Listen to this. For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, he scorned its shame, and yet he now has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him. He endured such opposition from sinful men so that you may not grow weary and lose heart. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering for he who promised is faithful.

I conclude with these questions. Will you actually receive the inheritance that's been promised? It doesn't look like it. Or does it?

What are you looking at? Fix your eyes on Jesus. He has attained the goal. It's a fact. You, Christian, who follow Christ, you will attain the goal too.

It's certain because Jesus is certain. Let's pray. Piano music Ao