

Hebrews 10:39

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Preacher: Fergus MacDonald

[0 : 00] I would like you to turn now to the passage we read from the letter to the Hebrews, Hebrews chapter 10, and reading at verse 39. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.

The letter to the Hebrews is, in one sense, one of the enigmas of the Bible, because we're not sure who the author was.

Some of the Greek manuscripts do say that it was written by Paul, but not the best manuscripts, and the style does seem to be very different from the style of the Apostle Paul.

It's enigmatic also because we do not know to which church it was written. The other letters are addressed to a specific church or to churches in the ancient world.

But this letter is addressed quite clearly to a community living in a Greek-Roman society, out, probably almost certainly outside Judea.

[1 : 21] But we're not told where. But nevertheless, this epistle, this letter, has a very relevant message to us today.

Although it was written to people who were very much influenced by Jewish ideas, especially ideas which are now, we know, were very popular among the Essenes, the people who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, and that group of people may have had some influence in this particular community. But nevertheless, although it is a book which has all of these unknowns, and it comes from a culture which is very different from ours, it is very relevant to what we have to say.

And especially as we begin a year, this is the first Sunday of a new year, the theme of the letter to the Hebrews, to persevere, to endure, to go forward, is a very relevant one.

I said we do not know exactly who wrote this letter, but it does appear to have been someone who had an interest in ships, because there are a lot of navigational illustrations and navigational terms that are used in this book.

[2 : 45] And one of these is found here in this verse, verse 39. We are not of those who shrink back and are lost and are destroyed, but those who believe and are saved.

The word that is used here is a seafaring term which has the idea of shortening the sail, or of furling the sail.

And he said we are not those who furl the sail, but rather we are those who go forward. And he goes on in the following chapter to speak of those who endured.

Earlier in the first passage we read in chapter 2, he speaks about the danger of drifting, another navigational term, and the danger of drifting away from Christ rather than moving steadily towards him.

So it may be helpful for us tonight to look at the way in which the navigational metaphors of this letter help us to understand it, and help us to see its relevance to us today, because we also are on a voyage.

[4 : 02] All of us are taking part in a journey. And we are reminded of that in every milestone, and especially at the beginning of a new year, that we are on a journey, that we are all pilgrims, that we are passing through time, moving towards eternity.

And what the writer to the Hebrews says, don't let drift, don't let yourself drift. Don't furl the sail. Keep going. Endure.

Persevere to the end. And be saved. Now ships at the time that this letter was written, ships in the first century, were of course sailing ships.

And this was true most of the time throughout human history, until the second part of the 19th century, most ships were sailing ships that weren't row ships.

The first sailing ships were, it is thought, were made by the Egyptians about 3000 BC. That's a thousand years before Abraham. So the sailing ship is not a new invention.

[5 : 16] Egypt had a growing trade with Crete during the second millennium. Before Christ. And the Egyptians were followed by the Greeks, who built more specialist and larger ships.

And there is, in other parts of the world, evidence also of sailing ships. In China, for example, there is some evidence in historic documents that go back to the year 472 before Christ.

Now, the performance of sailing ships over the centuries tended to improve rather slowly until the late 19th century.

There were only small differences between the vessels of the early Atlantic explorers who crossed the Atlantic from Europe to America for the first time, and the later large ships that traded with the Americas just immediately prior, or not quite immediately prior, but up to the middle of the 19th century.

But in the 19th century, a rapid trend developed towards finer forms and greater length, which led to major improvements in the sailing ship, so that performance rapidly improved.

[6 : 42] The clipper ships were built, which carried Chinese tea and Australian wool to Europe from the south and from the east.

I think we all remember a few months ago the Catty Sark. One of the few remaining clipper ships was partially destroyed, but fortunately it's being restored in London.

These ships were amazingly, from the sailing ship point of view, technically advanced. They were able to move very quickly over vast distances around the world.

But just as sailing ships were reaching their prime, from becoming refined and speedy, steam ships came in, and of course they were quickly followed by oil and gas turbine vessels.

But it is interesting, the sailing ship is still with us, although it is with us largely for pleasure and for sport. Nevertheless, perhaps there are more sailing ships in the world today than there have ever been before.

[7 : 58] And so the metaphor of the sail ship is a metaphor which is still vivid, still living. It still speaks to us today. The ships of the letter to the Hebrews may be a far cry from the supertankers of today, but we nevertheless still appreciate the significance of these seafaring terms in the letter to the Hebrews.

In fact, some people believe that as the world's energy supplies become more restricted, that large sailing ships may be reinvented.

And it is reckoned that, at least theoretically, that ships of 12,000 tons, almost entirely moved by sail, could move around the world at an average speed of 12 knots, and the fastest speed of 23 knots.

So, who knows, we may discover that sailing ships may come back in a big way. But I think we still know enough about sailing ships to be able to appreciate what is being said here.

One of the leaders of the early church, a man called Tertullian, who was the leader of the church in North Africa, preached a sermon which became very popular in the early centuries on the Christ stilling the storm in the Gospels, in which Tertullian said, the church is like a ship which is buffeted by the winds of temptation while the Lord appears to sleep until he is awakened by the prayers of his disciples.

[9 : 38] And so, this sermon of Tertullian established the picture that you see in some early Christian art, and still features in Christian art today, of the church as a ship.

The wind, of course, is a dangerous force, as the disciples discovered on the Sea of Galilee. And Jesus had to rebuke the sea and the wind.

And the word rebuke there is a word which is used elsewhere in the Gospels of rebuking demons and forces of evil. And it would appear that the forces of evil are in a mysterious way entwined in the forces of nature and can bring the forces of nature to serve their purposes at least up to a point. And it's important for us to remember that when we face earthquakes and tsunamis and so on. But the point that I want to emphasize tonight is not the destructive power of the wind, but the propulsive power of it.

And the way in which it can be harnessed. The way in which it can be utilized. And the way in which the writer of the Hebrews uses that as an illustration of Christian living.

[10 : 55] And so, as we find ourselves at a staging post, if you like, the beginning of a new year in our voyage through life, let us imagine what is required for our voyage.

Let us imagine that life is a voyage and that we are all seafarers. What is required if we are to reach our destination?

And I think the first thing that is required is a strong wind. A sailing ship goes nowhere if there is no wind. If there is a calm, if the ship is in the doldrums, then it does not move.

It just drifts. Wind is essential. A strong wind, but obviously not too strong. Not a wind of hurricane force. Now the task of the church, as God's ship, is to do the will of God.

Is to fulfill the purposes of God. And it can only do this as God provides the wind. And it's interesting that the Holy Spirit is likened to wind, frequently in the Bible.

[12:12] And it is as the Holy Spirit is given to us and is poured out upon us, that the church of God can move. The church of God can exist as an institution, but it cannot move as an organism.

Unless it is blown by the Spirit of God. And so there is an important lesson for us here. The secret of success for the church of God is not to have a good organization.

It's not to engage in multiple activities. It's not to develop an appropriate governing structure.

Although all of these things have a part to play. But these are means.

Which must fulfill the supreme end of the church. Which is to move forward under the power of the Spirit of God. It is only as the Spirit of God moves us.

That the church of God can indeed move forward. When Paul preached the gospel. He said he preached it to the Corinthians. In demonstration of the Spirit. And of power.

[13:21] And so the linking there of the Spirit and power. And that's so important in the life of the church. So important in the life of this congregation. Any congregation.

The power of the Spirit is essential if the church is to move forward. And if we are to move forward. We need to be filled with the Spirit of God. Great revivals of the church.

Are the result of mighty outpourings of God's Spirit. And we need to ask God to give us His Spirit. Not only for it to revive us. But to enable us to move forward.

To enable us to press forward. To enable us to endure. We are commanded to be filled with the Spirit. That's not for some Christians. Not for others.

Every Christian is commanded to be filled with God's Spirit. Motivated and empowered with the Spirit of God. And Jesus tells us that if we ask God.

[14:21] He will grant us His Spirit. And the question I want to ask you. And I ask myself tonight. At the beginning of this year. As we face a new year. Have you asked God to fill you with His Spirit this year?

Have you asked God to give you the wind. That you need to move forward. To fulfill His purposes. Have you asked God to empower you.

To do what you cannot do in and of yourself. To give you His Spirit. God will give His Spirit to those who ask Him. Said Jesus.

Let us at the beginning of this year. Ask Him. To give us His Spirit. That we may be enabled to move forward. That's the first requirement.

If the Church of God is to move forward. We require a strong wind. Secondly. If a ship is to move forward. It requires a good design. As we've seen from the history of the sailing ship.

[15:18] The efficiency of the ship. Was greatly facilitated by improvements. In design. This is a vital factor in its speed. And its sea worthiness. To design.

To sail ships. To achieve maximum performance. As one of the human race's oldest engineering challenges. As we've seen a great leap forward.

It took place in the 19th century. By the design of ships of greater length. In relation to their breadth. Now today. Those who specialize in yachts.

Sailing yachts. For races at least. The design of such yachts. Is a highly specialized activity. It's something that people spend.

Hours and hours doing. A modern sailing yacht. Would take. That would take part. In. Some of these. Highly specialized races.

[16:19] Would cost millions of pounds. It's a highly specialized design. They cost. Many. Many. Hundreds of thousands of pounds. As I've said.

Some time ago. I read an article. On this subject. Which was full of technical terms. Like. Like. Frictional resistance. Mass tension. Aerodynamics. And. There were.

The article was accompanied. By many vector diagrams. Showing the relationship. Between the hull. And the sail forces. Now. What are the lessons. Here for us. I think.

That. The. The lesson is. That. As. A church. We need to be. Appropriately. Structured. And organized. To do God's work. To take the full advantage. Of the power. Which is available to us. Now. To do this. The church needs to. Do two things. First of all. It needs to be scriptural. Because God's plan. For the church. Is. In the scriptures.

[17:16] And. It is important. That. We follow the pattern. Of the church. As we have it. In the new testament. There we have. The principles. Of the design. Of the church. Of God.

The basis. Of the church's. Worship. And organization. Is what. Authorized. In scripture. Or what. Can be deduced. From scripture. And it's important. For us. To affirm that. That the church. Must be. Scriptural. If it's going to. Move forward. Under the power. Of the spirit. Of God. At the same time. The church. Must be.

While being. Scriptural. Must also. Be able to adapt. To changing circumstances. And to changing. Cultures. These. The application.

Of this. Of the biblical principles. Vary from age to age. From time to time. Whitfield. And Wesley. For example. Were heavily criticized. In their time. For preaching the gospel.

[18:10] In the fields. They said. This was never done. They were heavily criticized. And yet. That led. To. The evangelical awakening. Under the spirit of God.

And we need to be prepared. To do things. In new ways. While being biblical. We need to be. Have this adaptability. This flexibility. In order to be open.

To. The leading of God's spirit. And so we need. To. Move forward. We need to. Have. The design. That God has given to us.

In his word. And a design. That is appropriate. To the circumstances. In which we find ourselves. The third requirement. Is that. The church. Like any ship.

Requires an active crew. No point in having a ship. With fine sails. And a wonderful design. If there is no crew. The ship doesn't move. The ship. Does not become active.

[19:06] The sailing of a clipper ship. In the heyday. Of the. Of. Of. Of the commercial. Sailing. Was. Was. The. Had.

These clipper ships. Had large crews. They had to handle. An enormous amount. Of rigging. And so. There was a. A large number. Of people involved. And it was crucial.

That. Everyone. Operated. And worked closely together. And we know today. That. The human factor. Is a key factor. In the success. Of a race.

There are other factors. As well. But if the crew. Don't work well. Then. The ship. Has got. Major. Problems. So.

It's important. For us. To recognize. Who is the captain. Now. The captain. Of. The ship. Which is the church. Is Christ. He is the head. Of the church. And it's crucial.

[19:59] That we recognize. That he is our head. And that we are. Under. Orders. To him. That we are not. The captain. The minister. Not the captain. The elders. Are not the captains. Christ.

Is the captain. Of the ship. And we need. To follow. Him. A one of the words. Which Paul uses. For himself. As a servant. A of the Lord.

Is a word. Which is used. Of an under. Ordersman. In the galleys. In the ancient world. And Paul. Sees himself. As an under. Ordersman. Someone.

Under. Instruction. Someone. Under. Order. Someone. Who. Is committed. To serve. His lord. And master. But of course. We must.

Not only be. Responsible. To the captain. But we must. Also be. Cooperative. With one another. A friend of mine. Who told me. That as his children. Grew up. He found that they.

[20:53] Did not get on. Too well together. He said. I taught them. To sail. Because if they don't. Work together. As a crew. Of a sailing ship. Then. They'll never. Work together.

And it's crucial. That. In the work of God. We work together. That we work. In harmony. And that we. Recognize. That the church. Is a body.

And that the church. Has. The members of the body. Are the crew. Of the church. We must also. Recognize. That the work. Is hard. There are forces.

Against us. There are. The work. Of evil. Is active. In the world. In which we live. The devil. Goes about. As a roaring lion. Seeking. Who we may devour. He is seeking.

To frustrate. The work. Of the church. And so. It's crucial. That we. Are. Committed. To. And be prepared.

[21 : 50] To work hard. Together. It's. Fascinating. To. To discover. That. That. While. People. Yachts. Yacht architects.

Can design a yacht. And a computer. And decide. Through their computer. Calculations. What is the maximum. Performance. Obtainable. That.

It is only. When that yacht. Is in a race. That in fact. It. Achieves. Its maximum. If they're just doing. A trial. A. There's not.

That. Energy. Which the crew. Don't have the energy. To do it. But when they're in a race. With others. And they're working. Together. They have this. Sense of. Of. Of.

They're able to achieve. The maximum. Performance. Of. The yacht. George. I mentioned.

Whitfield. And his field. Preaching. Whitfield. Once wrote. In his journal. He said. I never feel better.

[22 : 43] Than when I'm on the full. Stretch. For God. And. I think. It's when a crew. Is. On full stretch. That. It performs best.

And we're challenged. At the beginning. Of this year. To go on full stretch. To be out and out. To be fully committed. So that the church. May move forward.

Under the power. Of God's spirit. The final requirement. For the church. Is. A steady course. We've seen. The need for a strong wind.

A good design. An active crew. But now finally. A steady course. To plot a good course. Is a vitally important factor. In reaching. One's destination.

And. Especially when sailing. Against the wind. And. Having to tack. In the ancient days. People. In the olden days. People. Moved.

[23 : 41] By. Looking at landmarks. Or at the stars. Before the days. Of the compass. We need. Landmarks. We need. Stars. We need. A.

Points. To guide us. As we move. Along. We need to steer. A steady course. We read. In the lecture to Hebrews chapter 11. That Moses endured. Seeing the one who is invisible.

The word endured there. Is a word which again. Has got. A seafaring. Connotations. It was referred. It was used. It was used. Of. Of.

Of. Finding. Of holding. A steady. Course. He was able to do that. In spite of all the opposition. In spite of all the. The vicious issues. That he faced.

He was able to do it. Because he saw. God. Who is. Invisible. And so. We are to look. To him.

[24 : 35] Who's gone before us. The Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one. We have to look to. The figure. That is used. The metaphor. That is prominent. In Hebrews chapter 11. Is the metaphor.

Of running. Of athletics. That. The idea. Of looking ahead. To Jesus. Is a very strong. And that is the key. To look ahead.

And fix. Our eyes. Upon him. And let us run the race. With endurance. With perseverance. It's the same message. It's a different metaphor. But it's the same message.

That. That we have been. Noticing tonight. The message is the same. We are called. To. Endure. And so. We need to ask ourselves.

Whether we are looking. To Jesus. Are we holding. A steady course. The key. To moving. Keeping a clear course. Not only if you are sailing. But if you are running.

[25 : 28] Is to keep your eye. On the winning. Post. Or the winning line. To keep your eye. If you walk across. A field. In. In. When the snow. Lying in the ground. You can retrace.

Your steps. If you just walk across. As you. Would. To get to the other side. And look back. You'll discover that. You. Followed a rather wavy route. But if you fix your eye.

Upon a tree. The other side of the field. And go straight for that tree. And you look back. You'll have a straight course. The tracks will be straight. And that's what the writer. To the Hebrews is saying.

He's calling us to do. Is to look to Jesus. In order that we might endure. Have a steady course. How important that is. Not just for us as individuals. But for us as a congregation. For the people of God.

In our day and generation. To look to Jesus. And to see him. Going ahead. To see him. As the author and finisher. Of our faith.

[26 : 24] We read in the book of Proverbs. That. Say. Agar. Discovered. Four things. Which are too wonderful. To be fully understood. One of these. Was the way.

Of a ship. In the sea. But how much more wonderful. How much more. Wonderful.

To be understood. Is the way. Of the church of God. Upon the sea of life. When it's under full sail. When. It is.

It is. Holding a steady course. When the crew. Are active. And committed. That is something glorious. Something wonderful.
To behold. May God grant. That in this year. We may see. In our land. The church of God. Moving forward. As a ship. Across the sea.
[27 : 18] May God grant. And that we may move. In such a way. That men and women. Like Agar. May look and wonder. And say. This is something wonderful. This is something.
I want to be part of. This is something. That draws me. And brings me. Into the sound. And knowledge. Of the gospel. Of the Lord Jesus. May God grant.
That may be. Our vision. As we begin. This year. May God grant. That may. That vision. May be realized. By his grace. And the power. Of his spirit. May God grant.
That each. And all of us. May renew. Our commitment. As members. Of the crew. To the captain. Of our salvation. That he may indeed.
Be the captain. And that we may be. The obedient. And loyal. Members of the crew. In order that. He may be glorified. That the church.
[28 : 14] May achieve. His purpose. For it. And that the world. May be reached. With the good news. Of Jesus Christ. Let's bow our heads. In prayer. Thank you.