

Sermon for Sunday, October 21, 2012
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Perseverance
Hebrews 6:4-12

6:1 Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, ² instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³ And God permitting, we will do so. ⁴ It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, ⁶ if they fall away, 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. ⁷ Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. ⁸ But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned. ⁹ Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case — things that accompany salvation. ¹⁰ God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. ¹¹ We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. ¹² We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

1. It is hard to be a Christian

The Cardinals recently completed in the biggest comeback in a winner-tak-all baseball playoff game. Behind 6-0 in the deciding game with the Washington Nationals, they came back, although they still trailed 7-5 going into the last inning. Twice they were down to their last strike, but in the end they scored four runs with two out in the ninth inning to win. It was a remarkable comeback, the more so because they did virtually the same thing last year on the way to winning the World Series. People asked, "What is it about this team that makes them so fearless, such champions?" One answer, over and over – they never quit. They never stop competing.

It's stirring to see "our team" show such strength and determination, but it's also intriguing, even challenging, because, in every area of life, some people do quit when things go against them. Think of some times when people quit.

- If a man is ready to retire or take a new job, he stops caring.
- If a woman goes a long time without finding a job, she can stop searching.
- If a man can't break a bad habit, a self-destructive life-style, he can give in to it.

It's easy to see why perseverance was an issue in Hebrews: A group of Christians lived near Rome around 65 A.D. Converts from Judaism, they faced persecution for their faith. They lost property and friends and now they faced the danger of bloodshed. Frightened, some thought it best to leave the fellowship, even abandon the faith. Hebrews encourages them and us to keep fighting, to persevere.

So far, the author has a striking approach to the problem: he ignored it. Instead he focused attention on Jesus. This is the first message: Believers should keep eyes fixed on Him, not their problems, during the test. Yes, easier said than done.

But Hebrews assures us: Jesus, our hero, defeated Satan, broke the power of death. Yet, strong as he is, he also shared our humanity, understands our weakness. He understands temptation. He knows the hardest moments of life. He was:

- Betrayed by people he knew for a long time.
- Abandoned by his closest friend, his disciples.
- Misunderstood by his countryman, attacked by his rivals.

2. A genuine Christian perseveres

Jesus knew why it's tempting to give up, to despair. We know, Jesus knows, it's easier than ever, even acceptable, to quit in our culture. We change relationships, change jobs, change cities, change activities so easily. But let's make a distinction. It's one thing to move on to something new, another thing to quit. The Bible never says we have to stay where we are forever. Paul told slaves to respect, serve and obey their masters. He also said, "If you can gain your freedom, do so."

In persecution, Christians often flee from danger. In Luke, Jesus predicts that Rome will attack, desecrate, and destroy the city of Jerusalem. He tells them:

When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city (Luke 21:20-21).

Jesus told his disciples to change their location but not their vocation. Change location – your mailing address. Don't change your vocation – God's call to know and serve Jesus. In fact, some Christians had left Rome earlier. Acts 18:2 introduces two Christian Jews, ministry partners of Paul: "Paul met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome."

Roman historians suggest that Claudius ordered them out because they were disputing about Jesus. So they moved to Corinth where their life-style was unchanged. They made tents, like Paul, but they held to the faith – even though it had caused them some trouble – and kept working together for the gospel. So they changed location, but not vocation.

That's what we need to do too. It's no sin to change jobs, to move to another city. But wherever we live and work, we live by the light of the gospel – by the basic Christian principles of love, justice, compassion, mercy, faithfulness. Our vocation – our call from God doesn't change. Hebrews says: When life is hard, we can draw near to him and we will receive mercy and find aid in the hour of need (4:16).

Sadly, some in the church contemplated the opposite: Keeping their location and changing their vocation. They wanted to hide their faith, put it in a closet, even deny their faith in Jesus. Deliberate, planned, knowing, public rejection of Christ is apostasy. How do people come to that? Hebrews mentions three ways to stray:

- Some stray in ignorance. They need gentle correction (5:3)
- Some are dull or sleepy, like spiritual infants, they are sleepy, forgetful. They need to wake up, listen, remember the basic principles of the faith (5:12).
- Some repudiate Jesus, say they no longer believe. Hebrews warns them (6:4-8).

As always, Hebrews addresses this problem two ways. First, it presents the excellence of Christ. Second, it encourages endurance. Hebrews 5 describes the greatness of Jesus, God's high priest:

In the Old Testament God selected priests to represent men to God. They offered gifts to God in a spirit of thanksgiving. They also offered sacrifices to atone for sins. Jesus did both things. His whole life was thanksgiving... He gave thanks before meals (Matt 15:36). He gave thanks when he healed people (Jn 11:41). He gave thanks that God revealed himself to his people (Mt 11:25). And at the end of his years on earth, he offered himself as a sacrifice for sins.

So Jesus is high priest who experienced our life and so can represent us to the Father. He was tempted so he can deal gently with us when we stray in ignorance. Some want to deal harshly with sin. Others want to ignore it. Stoics advocate indifference. You can't change history or fate. Don't let anything bother you.

No, Hebrews says, it *should* bother us when something is wrong. But we are gentle, understanding. We're not angry or indifferent. We "deal gently." That is the calling for a leader - to gently instruct people not to stray due to ignorance (5:3-4).

Jesus is the perfect leader, so he both cares when we stray and instructs us when we stray. Indeed, Hebrews reminds us that Jesus prayed with tears. He wept, he pleaded for the needs of his disciples – the twelve and us for his people. Hebrews 7:25 says, "Jesus always lives to make intercession" for those who draw near to God.

He prayed for himself. If possible, he would accept release from his death on the cross but, as the Father willed. And when he it came time for him to give his life, Hebrews 9:14 says he did so with the Spirit's aid. Read Hebrews 5:7-9:

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

So Jesus prayed for himself and for us. God heard him and although he heard, he still was not excused from suffering. Indeed he understood obedience better than ever because of his suffering. This provides a pattern and lesson for us. (Away with the prosperity gospel and vain promises of easy life.) If the Father heard Jesus his Son, but did not spare him, should we dream that we will be spared trouble?

3. The genuine believer perseveres.

Hebrews prepares us to persevere. It says the Christian life is good but hard. I once climbed the same mountain with the same man two years in a row. The first year the man dreamed he was going for a long walk. He wasn't prepared, physically or mentally, and he had to turn around after three hours, at 12,000 feet. Over the next year he got in shape, got strong. And the next year he made it to the top, because he was ready for it be hard. So too, life is good, but hard. Hard enough, sometimes, that people think of quitting.

When our children were very young we sometimes gave them tasks that stretched or challenged them. We thought they were within reach, but sometimes they disagreed. Sometimes they said, "It's too hard, I can't do it."

I'd say, "Yes, this job is hard, but don't say, 'It's too hard; I can't.' Say, 'This is hard,' and I will help you." In that spirit, Hebrews says a willingness to work is essential. He knows: toughness and focus are missing in some people. See Hebrews 5:11-14:

5:11 – The pastor has much to say, but it's "hard to explain, because you are slow to learn" – lazy, careless, reluctant listeners. It's like someone texting at the dinner table – by choice, never fully in the conversation, missing things. Resist!

5:12 – They've believed long enough that they should be teachers by now. They should be mature (5:14)! But alas, they've reverted to infancy. They can't even handle meat, just milk.

5:13 – They forgotten the elementary truths about the word – above all, the word of Christ. They are making no moral progress. Why? To get better at anything, you have to practice. And they're not practicing....

Some who seem to be Christians do not persevere - The lazy Christian

Teachers know: Some students don't want to listen. The leader/author wants to press on with his teaching about Jesus' priesthood. But he has to pause and ask, "Are all of you listening?" he has to chide them. Though they should be teachers, they need to rehearse the essentials. They are dull, lazy listeners. Content with a few fundamentals of the faith, they have forgotten half of them. They know a little and don't practice what they do know. How sad – may this describe none of us.

Note: If you have a skill and never practice it, you lose it. I can't read Latin any more. Skills fade a little every day. This is familiar. But the same is true spiritually.

In Hebrews 6:1-3, the author says that though they aren't quite ready for it, he wants to move to deeper things. They have already covered the basics: that Jesus is Messiah, the need for repentance, faith, the resurrection and judgment. He wants to press on: "Therefore" leaving the basics "let us go on to maturity."

Literally, it says, "Let us be carried to maturity." That implies that God is the agent. He carries us to maturity. We let God lead us.

But will everyone let God carry them? Some of them are far from this. People stumble in different ways, for different reasons. Hebrews mentions: Some make mistakes due to simple ignorance. The cure is patient instruction. Second, some are careless, lazy. They need instruction but have no appetite for it. They had instruction but forgot it.

A third group is deliberate. Some people want to rebel. Most people break traffic laws by accident, or a little bit – 29 miles per hour in a 25 mile per hour zone. But some race on country roads, doing 90 miles per hour in a 40 miles per hours zone. He has to talk about them.

Apostasy – or - Some who seem to be Christians do not persevere

The pastor 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 and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance. Hear the point: It is impossible to restore someone who fits this five-fold description. They:

- They have been enlightened. That is, they heard the gospel in its clarity and power. The truth seemed clear, well-illuminated (Jn 1:9, Col 4:5, Eph 1:18).
- They have tasted – experienced – the array of God's blessings, heavenly gifts.
- They have become partakers of the Spirit. This probably includes the ability to serve God and other people – "ministry success."
- They have tasted the goodness of the word of God, and of powers of the age to come – that is, signs of God's reign.

By every appearance, this person is a believer. They saw the light of the gospel, they loved God's word, felt the power of the Spirit. Having this great experience, abandoned it and turned away.

They tasted all this, the transforming experience of faith, then repudiated it. If so they, "crucify the Son of God all over again", that is, they expose him to public shame. If they experience all the blessings of the life and deliberately repudiate it, even scorn it and Jesus himself, they cannot be restored. Concept: Not one dark moment, not a terrible word or deed, but a settled attitude of hostility.

Imagine that someone became the governor of Missouri after an ardent campaign. He declared his passion for the state, his goals for a thriving state. Then three years into his term, he faltered in a crisis. In a tough interview he blew up. "This state is ungovernable. I hate my job. My fellow politicians are petty and grasping. The people don't even care about their own future. They're ungovernable. I'm sorry I ever ran for office. I hate my job and can't wait to quit."

Time passes, he makes a public speech about his tirade. He says, "I'm sorry I blew up, but it's the truth. I hate politics. I wish I lived in another state. I've felt a hypocrite for years. I had to stop living a lie. I resign."

That's like apostasy. He tasted the best of politics, then repudiated it, cursed it, "I want no part of this." Could he be restored as governor a year later? No. That's the message of Hebrews 6.

Interpreting Hebrews 6 - Some who seem to be Christians do not persevere

The Arminian view teaches that one can be saved and lost. But there is a problem with their view. Arminians believe it's possible to be saved and lost repeatedly – several times a year, some say. But this contradicts that view. If this teaches one can be saved and then lost, it means a believer who repudiates the faith can never be restored!

Others say this sharp warning is God's instrument to keep people from apostasy. If a genuine believer were to fall to apostasy, he or she would be unable to repent. That is a theoretical possibility, but it never really happens because God preserves his people. He does that in many ways – by assurance of his love, by the care of fellow Christians. This very warning is one of the means God uses to keep believers from toying with spiritual disaster.

Hebrews 6 describes the same thing Jesus describes in the parable of the Sower. From a human, pastoral perspective, it seems that people know the Lord, then reject faith. By all appearances, some people become disciples and then reject the Lord. They confess the faith, join the church, change their lives. They look like believers in every way. Some, like Judas, even do great things in God's name. Then they say, "I am not a believer." Some people hear the word in its power, change their lives and then quit. If they do all this, then reject it, repentance is impossible.

Hebrews doesn't say "These people were redeemed, then rejected the faith and are lost." The writer describes what he sees as a pastor not what God sees with all the insight of eternity. To our eyes, some seem to be saved and lost. To our eyes, some make a good confession, but eventually repudiate Christ. To our eyes, these people never come back – well, almost never.

But we know: Some people who seem hopeless do come back, years later. I have a friend who left for twenty years, then returned. His repudiation was not as complete as it seemed. We also know that the Lord keeps those who truly belonged to Him. No true Christian finally rejects God.

4. God's people persevere because God perseveres with us.

Even if we don't persevere with God, he perseveres with us. No genuine Christian falls forever because God promises to keep us. In Hebrews 13, God says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" 13:5.

This is the testimony of all Scripture. Paul says the Lord began a good work in us and will complete it (Phil 1:6). Romans: Nothing can separate us from love of Christ. Peter 1:4-5 says we have an imperishable inheritance that is kept in heaven for us, even as he protects us by his power, until his salvation is fully revealed to us.

Language: Please look carefully at the language of 6:4-8, how abstract it sounds from 6:7-9: It is impossible... If they fall away... Land that drinks in rain should produce a crop. He never says, "I'm talking about you falling away."

When he finally does say "You" it is: "Though we speak this way, beloved, as for you, we are confident of better things" (6:9). His people are not fruitless. No! Instead, "God will not forget your works and the love you have shown" (6:10)!

Hebrews warns us – consider the dangers of laziness, dullness. Don't give in to fear and so depart from the faith, the gifts of the Spirit. Let the warning stir you to persevere and so prove your repentance and faith to be real. "Don't become lazy." Yes, God promises to keep you in Christ (John 10:28, Rom 8:28-30). But hear the warnings. Why do you think the Bible places them side by side in Romans, John, and here?

5. God teaches us how to persevere.

How then shall we persevere? Hebrews suggest this: First, we keep our eyes on Jesus. As we saw, Hebrews focuses on Jesus. We fix our eyes on Him, not the problems. Hebrews assures us: Jesus, our hero, defeated Satan, broke the power of death. Yet, strong as he is, he also shared our humanity, understands our weakness.

We're not naïve, but we can take our eyes off our problems and look to him. Don't worry about losing, play hard. Don't worry about rejection, work hard.

The pastor is sure that he has to warn his people about the danger of running, the danger of apostasy. But he offers – and we receive gospel encouragement that is simple but potent. "Dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case – things that accompany salvation." He knows them, is sure of them. That counts. Let me remind you – we have a similar power to bless and assure. God loves you, I love you. He will carry you through.