

The Urgency of Our Faithfulness Hebrews 3:12–19

We're all familiar with the Sisyphean task, at least in principle.¹ You know that job you can never seem to finish no matter how long and how hard you try? You work tirelessly at it, but it seems like you're making little to no progress. Laundry, or attempting to corral a room full of 2-year-old children to sit down at story time—once you get two seated, three more pop up. Sometimes we face this in our jobs, or, perhaps we've succumbed to thinking this way concerning our spiritual progress. It's natural for us, at some point, to consider if our efforts are truly making a difference. And the temptation in the face of unmet expectations is to give up or find another way altogether.

When it comes to life in Christ, effort and difficult labor on our part must figure into what God has ordered for us each day. This letter will tell us that Jesus learned obedience through what He suffered.² Why would our lives be shielded from that same reality if we're following in His steps?³ This very sermon-letter expresses that none of us has resisted to the point of dying in our fight for faithfulness like Christ did.⁴ He endured what we never could have. But does this mean we have nothing to endure? That He's done it all? Hebrews, this text, will answer clearly that we now, based on His endurance, have an enduring journey of our own to traverse. We're to "*run with endurance the race that is set before us.*"⁵ But how are we to run it? That's another question answered for us here by the Holy Spirit. Saving faith perseveres, and throughout the whole book of Hebrews, scripture's Author has very graciously supplied illustrations and explanations on what an enduring faith looks like and what it doesn't. The text this morning unfolds these very things.

I. Those who persevere (12-14)...

Last week Pastor Matt helpfully summarized his conclusion with these words, "We're to consider [Jesus], what He's done on our behalf. We're to consider Him better, as the essence of God's revelation. And we're to consider Him now." We were left with a sense of urgency and today's text extends the urgency. The pocket of Jews who had professed Christ were tempted to take the path of least resistance, but a different response is expected for those who profess to know the LORD. And the author of Hebrews keeps doing what he's been doing—peppering the whole of his argument with the Old Testament scriptures, showing a continuity regarding the will of God. These new, Jewish converts were to be a people with a lively, ready faith, and that with a more compelling reason to be so—the Maker of and Ruler over God's house has come near to save. Clouds of fire and angelic glories have been eclipsed. A superior Man has come to save us from sin's penalty and to strengthen us to not give up in the fight against sin's power, with the latter being the thrust of today's section.

Structurally, it's reasonably plain to see what the Spirit leads this author to express. You have a text, Psalm 95, then commentary on that prayer-song follows. In sermonical fashion, he's applying the psalm to his readers, with the central theme of showing us how to continue on with Christ-like endurance.

A. *Are careful to tend the heart*

¹ In ancient Greek literature, Sisyphus was condemned by Zeus to roll a large stone from the bottom of a mountain in Hades to its peak, and each time he would reach the top the stone would roll back down, only for Sisyphus to repeat the process.

² Hebrews 5:8

³ 1 Peter 4:1, "*Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking...*"

⁴ Hebrews 12:3-4

⁵ Hebrews 12:1

¹² ***Take care, brothers and sisters, that there will not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.*** I don't have to convince you of the ethos of these words. The recipients of this letter are being warned. The words ***take care*** are in the imperative. Adding a touch of tenderness to the warning with ***brothers and sisters***, show us that he's addressing who he believes to be true converts. These spiritual siblings must urgently see to their inner health. They must tend to their hearts, to quote Solomon, "*with all vigilance... [remembering] that from it flow the springs of life.*"⁶ It's not a stretch to say that this is a central endeavor of the Christian walk—to see after, to manage by the tools given from heaven, to be a gardener of that place which is the seat of our principles and the foundation of our actions, the ***heart***. This urgent word is meant to recalibrate us spiritually whereby we're showing a sensitivity to what is going on in us, what is coming at us from various directions, and meeting those stirrings through God's means.

Without this diligence, without continued reliance on the gospel, without an enduring faith in the supreme Christ and His great work in our stead, without putting to death the misdeeds of the flesh by the Word, look what is naturally produced—***an evil, unbelieving heart***. What does that unbelief look like? When we open up to the original passages to which Psalm 95 is referring, we discover that it's more than an indifferent unbelief. Numbers 14 is one place where the Psalmist draws his conclusions. As Israel wondered in the wilderness, they waned in faith. We see the severity of God's words over their sin, "*And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, [27] 'How long shall this wicked congregation grumble against me? I have heard the grumbings of the people of Israel...'*" Their distrust was seen in their complaining about the state of things. "*Now the rabble (as in "rabble rousers") that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, 'Oh that we had meat to eat! [5] We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. [6] But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.'*" I imagine it was monotonous eating the same things day after day, but underneath their craving for Egyptian fare was a rejection of God plan.

At root, some among the readers of this letter were expressing the same basic distrust.⁷ The novelty of this "*new and living way*" had worn off.⁸ Family and social challenges had resulted from their embrace of the gospel and they were being pulled back to life under the Mosaic Law. The words ***falls away*** are where we get our word for apostasy. Just as the sufficiency of God's leading and God's Law weren't enough for the Israelites, those addressed here are turning away from the sufficiency of Christ for all of life. The central issue was not whether or not these Jews were truly converted or never believed in the first place. Hebrews 6 will afford us those considerations. But here, it's enough for us to see that those who professed were in danger of God's judgment because they were signaling a distrust in God. His goodness through His Son and the wise provisions which flow out from Him amid their difficulties was not enough.

When we consider all that we've covered thus far in Hebrews, it's not difficult to see the antidote to an ***unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God***—a heart of faith which prizes Christ above all. It is a heart that hears His Word and *draws near* instead of ***falls away***. At least six times in Hebrews that exhortation is given to combat a heart of unbelief—*draw near*. *Draw near* to the Father through Christ—Hebrews 7:25. *Draw near* for mercy—Hebrews 4:16. *Draw near* with hope—Hebrews 7:19. *Draw near* in faith—Hebrews 10:22. Are you cautiously, carefully tending your heart by hearing God's word and joining what you're hearing with faith?⁹ Do you, right now, trust that Christ is better, the

⁶ Proverbs 4:23

⁷ Time won't allow us to explore the other passages in the Pentateuch that reveal Israel's recalcitrant hearts, such as Exodus 17 or Deuteronomy 31.

⁸ Hebrews 10:20

⁹ Hebrews 4:2 makes this connection.

best of God's blessings? That He made all, reigns over all, suffered death for all His children, calls them all brothers with no shame, defeated the devil and death by His all-sufficient sacrifice? This is how you tend the heart—you hear His claims and instructions, and you draw near to the *living God* by believing afresh.¹⁰

B. *Are to encourage others daily*

¹³ ***But encourage one another every day, as long as it is still called “today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.*** What is one way that individual believers deal with sin's deceitfulness? They give and receive gospel-seasoned encouragement from one another. It should be the way of life in the divine family. It is an ongoing practice, and one that's to be an *every day* occurrence. The practice of encouragement actually adds relational depth and clear direction to our lives. There are no insignificant days, with each day an opportunity to “*excel in building up the church.*”¹¹ The injection of the word *today* from Psalm 95 quoted above is a doubling down on the importance of the practice. It's not something you did yesterday and now you're good for a while. It's not something to be put off until tomorrow. If your struggles and discouragements rarely take a break, what are the chances that others in this room need your encouragement to keep following Jesus, and that they need those today? The probability is high.

Again, like the heart, this is a discipline that needs nurturing. If I know what's going on in your life, what's bringing you down, agitating your faith, drawing you away from faithfulness, then I'm in a better position to know how to encourage you on. And since this practice should run in both directions, a *one another* habit, we need to function with a measure of openness, do we not? This was certainly a central feature in the way the apostle Paul thought about relationships within the church. In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul writes to the church that he had both praised and chided, “*We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open.*”¹² *You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections.* ¹³ *In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.*” Honesty and openness grounded in love marked Paul's plea. This is not a bothersome nosiness, nor is it permission to disregard all points of privacy.¹² But the church should possess a culture where “mind your own business” is rarely heard.

I could really embarrass a few of you in this sanctuary. Just this past week I've received a few encouraging words from some of you. Out of the blue a brother texted me about his willingness to help me with a home project. Sometimes the encouragement comes without words. Another saint, leading by example, showed me a few moments of genuine love for a spouse. These things and more fed my trust in the Lord and His goodness, and kept me on some level from a *hardened, unbelieving* heart.

Yes, the person beside you is to be considered that important. A community of faith where godliness is seen and verbally builds up has a way of preventing the hardening that comes by way of *sin*. And by its very nature sin carries with it a *deceitfulness*. That is, without the body of Christ, and the ongoing giving and receiving of encouragement found in it, we should expect her members to spiral (and continue to spiral) into destructive sin cycles without even realizing it, and apostasy is not out of bounds in our context. Do you see the urgency of this?

¹⁰ Romans 10:10, “*For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.*”

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 14:12

¹² Alister Begg, sermon on Hebrews 3:1-19, [https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/holding-firmly-to-the-end-pt-2/#\[18\]](https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/holding-firmly-to-the-end-pt-2/#[18])

The wilderness wanderers put God to the test by failing to tend their heart and its sinful stirrings. Instead of encouraging with their words, they used them to grumble. But those who hope to persevere must be vigilant to care for their own heart and committed to encourage God's own heart—the church.

C. *Are committed to holding Christ firm*

¹⁴ ***For we have become partakers of Christ if we keep the beginning of our commitment firm until the end...*** Now, our theological sensibilities to remember the preservation of the saints is a healthy one. That preservation is what sits eternally underneath all of our perseverance. And I have the same propensity in making sure God gains the glory for me holding firm to Him because He's holding firm to me, and will do so all the way to either the end of my life, or to the Day of His visitation. When we pass away, or when Christ comes back—whichever is first—He gets the credit for sustaining us and keeping us. In fact, we cling rightly to texts such as Philippians 1:6, “*And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*” And I wouldn't put it past you to periodically lose your composure at every past tense verb of Romans 8:30!¹³

But here in verse 14, that little word *if* seems to infringe upon our doctrinal darling of preservation. It does so because it makes our commitment keeping to Christ a condition of becoming partakers of Christ. It's the same sentence structure as Hebrews 3:6, “*Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.*” What these conditional clauses show us is not a new understanding of human effort, but that our final salvation will testify to the harmonic tension between our perseverance and God's preservation. Both are absolutely true. In Matthew 24:13, Jesus said, “*But the one who endures to the end will be saved.*” Our same Lord also taught, John 6:39, “*And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.*” God has chosen His sheep and will bring them all the way home with a culminating resurrection to life forevermore. But those who claim Him must ***keep the beginning of [their] commitment firm until the end***, or they will hear the words *depart from Me, for I never knew you.*¹⁴ Israel knew this severity of God. As God's rest for Israel was only granted to those who lived by faith, so his final rest offered in the gospel will be experienced by those who are marked with lives which walk by faith and not by sight.

Even with these directives for persevering, I'm still falling short of the high note of urgency that this text is pressing onto each of its readers. Verse fifteen repeats verse seven for a good reason. The disciple who desires to persevere must hear God's word and do it, in the here and now, ***today***, not the there and then. Today the heart needs tending. Mutual encouragement reciprocated today strengthens the heart to endure the day. Today the call to ***keep our commitment to Christ firm until the end*** stands.

And maybe we're all, again, a bit uneasy at this firm emphasis on our lives and our efforts. “Chris, shouldn't you be more careful in pressing this? After all, once God saves us, we can never be unsaved, right?” I understand the concern, but we must bow to scripture and recognize that the LORD has labored throughout His Word to disabuse us of presumption. I'm taken to a passage that mirrors ours this morning, one which Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. 1 Corinthians 10:1-12 speaks of Israel being “*laid low in the wilderness*” because they “*craved evil*” and “*tried the Lord*” and because of their unbelief, the vast majority of them didn't step foot in the land of promise. At the end of that particular section, hear what the Spirit admonished the Corinthians based on Israel's bad example,

¹³ Which I've underlined for your convenience and momentary praise. “*And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*”

¹⁴ Matthew 7:23

“Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.” If you’re simply on cruise control, flying only the flag of the *preservation* of the saints, don’t take it down, but run another flag up the poll that says *perseverance*.

And the thrust here by the author makes sense in light of his Jewish recipients. To them “*belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises...[and] the patriarchs.*” They came out of a climate of presumption, and under the gospel, God keeps the tension tight between His sovereign maintenance to keep us and our sanctifying exertions to ***keep the beginning of our commitment firm until the end.***

Does this mean that we won’t falter? No, but what it does mean is that we must come back to faith in and faithfulness to Christ if we are to become partakers with Christ. And we’re to consider what the ***beginning of our commitment*** looked like; those first steps into the Christian faith, were they not filled with marveling at the grace of God displayed in Jesus’ work for us? We didn’t know all the doctrinal categories we know now, or how to pray five good sentences, or how to think about matters of conscience, but we sure trusted Jesus and clearly saw His love for us, and we loved Him for such kindness. Our uniformed yet stout grip we had on Christ at the beginning was a beautiful, genuine expression of trust. We’re to keep that, stoke that, feed that with all the means of grace God has given us. The author of Hebrews is simply, but powerfully echoing the warning found on the lips of our Lord mentioned earlier, “...*the one who endures to the end will be saved.*”¹⁵ Our final rescue from these bodies of death will not come without our lives aligning with the demands of God’s Word. This very letter will convey the same point: “*Strive...for the holiness (present effort) without which no one will see (future glory) the Lord.*”¹⁶

II. Those who fail to persevere (15-19)...

A. Are dismissive and disobedient to revelation

¹⁵ ...*while it is said, “TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME.”*¹⁶ *For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses?*¹⁷ Here again we note value of a negative example. One could almost say that the definition of a ***hardened heart*** is to clearly ***hear [God’s] voice*** in His Word and then to clearly ignore what You’ve heard from Him. James tells us that we can actually look into the mirror of the Word and walk away without ever adjusting what is out of place in our lives—that is a hardening of the heart. This is the main way Israel resisted the LORD God. They dismissed His word of promise to inherit the land and they disobeyed His Law. It’s the terrible irony of those being rescued from enslavement to only then enter into another kind.¹⁷ The beneficiaries of this letter were to take care that they not follow that generation’s example. For they, too, had the message of salvation confirmed by signs and wonders (2:1-4) and knew the initial joys of being released from a bully tyrant who was permitted to hang the threat of death over them (2:14-16).¹⁸

Israel willfully stepped out of Pharaoh’s frying pan and into the fire of God’s judgment. These Jewish professors were in danger of a similar, deadly misstep.

B. Are under the threat of destruction

¹⁵ Matthew 24:13

¹⁶ Hebrews 12:14

¹⁷ Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians*, 175.

¹⁸ Peter O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 153.

¹⁷ And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose dead bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹ And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.

The unbelief and disobedience resulted in the just anger and just punishment of the God who had piled up grace before, during, and after the exodus. The Israelites were sloppy heart-managers and ungrateful heart-grumblers. They “*abandoned the love that had at first,*” forfeiting their inheritance.¹⁹ It was a mercy to the recipients of Hebrews to read the warnings and to get a grip on the urgency of daily persevering. So, the questions which we can never stop asking ourselves, as long as we have breath: Do I trust in Jesus Christ, today? Does my lifestyle prove my trust, today? Am I managing my oft divided heart, today? Who might I encourage in this sanctuary, today?

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no text in the New Testament that shows us that God reverses spiritual birth. There are no overturned adoptions in His family. The point of holding up Israel as an example of unbelief is to admonish us all to be the true people of God that Israel failed to be.²⁰ Our inheritance will be received by faith—nothing has changed. But we don’t give up seeking to know and obey the Lord. Life in Him is far from a Sisyphean task. When we “*work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling...God [will] work in [us], both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*” A life given to God and a God given to our good, pleased the Trinity in eternity past, and pleases Him today.²¹

So, are you flying both flags? Preservation and perseverance? The biblical writers seem to do it with regularity. In Jude 21 we read of one, “*keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.*” Then in Jude 25 we find the other, “*Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy...*” I keep. God keeps. No great explanatory notes from Jude, just both realities blowing for the glory of God.

At the Lord’s table today, we’ll consider the mercy of a Savior who has worked salvation for us. After He made purification for our sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high to reign. And, to today’s point, “*If we endure,*” Paul writes to Timothy, “*we will also reign with Him.*”²²

¹⁹ Revelation 2:4

²⁰ Thomas Schreiner, *The Race Set Before Us*, 226.

²¹ Philippians 2:12b-13

²² 2 Timothy 2:12