



GRACE CHURCH

Quo Vadis?

Hebrews 10:26-39

Grace Church | 1.22.23



In the national gallery of art in London you can find a famous painting by the Italian Baroque painter Annibale Carracci entitled “*Domine Quo Vadis?*”, which is Latin for “where are you going, Lord”? The painting is a scene from the apocryphal book “Acts of Peter”, which means it is an ancient text of unknown origin, and not verifiable enough to be included in the Bible. In the scene, Peter is older in years, and is leaving Rome, fleeing persecution and threat of death during the time of Nero. On the way, he has a vision of the risen Christ, who he asks “where are you going”? Jesus replies: “I am going to Rome to be crucified again.”



As the story goes, Peter is struck by this vision—and instead of abandoning the church for fear of his death, he turns around and returns to Rome, where soon after he is also crucified. Whether or not this is true we are uncertain, but the point remains: for a follower of Jesus to not be willing to accept the same death of Jesus is to commit a terrible denial of Jesus, akin to crucifying Christ again. Forced with the choice of denying Jesus, or dying with him, Peter chose to endure to the end, to be crucified with Christ.

In the book of Hebrews, the author has been laboring to show us the superiority of Jesus, his covenant, and his work. But the author is not naive: he knows that it's not easy to follow Christ. It's easy to say you follow Christ, but what about when the stakes are higher? The audience of Hebrews were in a similar situation to Peter historically—they were staring down the barrel of potential death. But let me remind you that it is not getting *easier* to follow Jesus in our world. It's not getting easier to believe there is one way to God, to believe in God's design for nature and sex and gender, to reject the desire to worship yourself, worship your success, or worship pleasure. It never really has been. Jesus still calls us to take up our cross and follow him, to run the race set before us, to trust him and not give up.

Here in chapter 10, the author of Hebrews reminds us in **verse 36**, we are in need of endurance. It's a marathon, following Jesus, not a sprint. A great thing about an intergenerational church is that we have members near the beginning of their journey of faith, and those near the end. But both need endurance. Without endurance, says **verse 36**, we won't receive what is promised, which we've seen in Hebrews is the rest of God, the presence of God, the riches of God. In other words, if we give up, if we throw in the towel, all of this Jesus stuff will be in vain.

So today maybe you are met with your own "Quo Vadis" moment. The risen Christ, through the book of Hebrews, is meeting us. In various ways, we are worn down, ready to run and flee. We lack confidence: or, as Buck helped us see last week, we lack faith, hope, and love. So here comes Jesus, carrying his cross, meeting us on the way, running from the fear of persecution, of loss, of hardship—calling us to follow him afresh, even unto death. How do we endure? What fuels us to say yes to that call? In our text I want to show you three necessary steps to endurance in Christ: **1) Know the Stakes; 2) Recall the Race; 3) Trust in the Righteous One.**

Know the Stakes (26-31)

It's possible that this passage was a bit terrifying to you as it was read this morning. Take a look at the severity of these warnings. They are in conditional structure:

If... You go on sinning deliberately after receiving knowledge of the truth
 Trample underfoot the Son of God
 Profane the blood of the covenant
 Outrage the Spirit of Grace



Then... There is no sacrifice for your sin
You have a fearful and not hopeful expectation of judgment
You will experience fury of fire
You will receive vengeance from God

The reason that this warning is terrifying is because of the severity of the “then” statements”. Already the author has shown us how beautiful and freeing it is to be covered once for all in the blood of Jesus. The opposite of that freedom is terror—for there to be no sacrifice for sins means that all of our sins catch up to us, that instead of “eagerly waiting” for Jesus to return, as we saw at the end of chapter 9, we instead want to live as long as we can to delay the day where we have to answer for our actions. The author shows us a specific example in referencing the law of Moses in **verse 28**, pointing back to Deuteronomy 17, where a kind of sin is described that is a complete deliberate rejection of God in order to serve idols. If a few witnesses confirm this, there is no mercy, but they are taken out of the camp and stoned. How much more severe will the punishment be, says the text, for deliberately rejecting the better new covenant of Christ?

The picture painted here is of a person whose heart is so hardened that they feel comfortable spitting in the face of God, daring him to do something about it. You can tell this is the case by the language of “trampling the Son of God”: that is a mockery not just of Christianity, but of Jesus. The same language is used in “profaning the blood of the covenant”. The image is of someone who hears, as we preached a few weeks ago, of the preciousness of Christ’s blood—that he spilt it, the only innocent one, for our sake—and dismissing it as worthless, or worse, dirty. This is not normal pride—it’s cosmic hubris.

The best way I know to describe this “trampling” and “profaning” is when we take something that is meant to show us the holiness and grace of God, and make a mockery of it, twisting it on its head. The philosopher Phillip Reiff calls these reversed symbols “deathworks”. His example is of a famous photo, wherein a crucifix is submerged in the artist’s urine. In Reiff’s words—the sacramental has become excremental. Instead of the symbol of Christ being a picture of grace, the sacred image is profaned.¹ Pornography is another example: it takes something meant to be sacred (sex between a husband and wife), and turns it on its head. This may be shocking and quite vulgar to you—but that is the point.

The blood of Jesus, the living way opened through the curtain, the only way to God—what could be more sacred? So what happens when it is rejected, uncherished, mocked, abused, or paraded as a symbol of death? What is the consequence of such vulgarity? If you turn away from Christ’s sacrifice, there is no other sacrifice to turn to, so you are still in your sins. And on the day of judgment, you cannot escape the justice of God.

¹ I first read of this concept in Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. Here is a brief illustration. <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2021/10/the-church-among-the-deathworks>



Jesus actually talks about this whole-sale, deliberate rejection of his message. In Matthew 12, when he speaks to the Pharisees, he warns them that they could be headed towards an “unpardonable sin” of “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit”. The unpardonable sin he is talking about is a persistent (“go on sinning”) profaning of what is holy. The sin he is talking about is rejection—and it is unforgivable not because Jesus’ sacrifice is lacking in power to forgive, but because the sin itself is a deliberate rejection of his sacrifice. It’s learning of the great gift of God in the gospel, looking Jesus in the face, and saying: “I’d rather stay in my sin”.

So take a deep breath here. This text is written to the church, it’s not a doomsday warning preached in the streets. Why then would the author of Hebrews use such severe and strong language, if he is speaking to Christians? The reason is not to scare us into believing that we might lose the salvation that we have been given. Remember, part of the point of Hebrews is that we can have *confidence* in our standing before God, in the work of Jesus as complete and efficacious! The point of the warning is to help us to remember the stakes.

Again, back to Quo Vadis. Peter is forgiven. Peter is saved by grace. Peter has walked with Jesus. But even Peter is tempted to give up. How is he to endure? Well, one way is by Jesus showing up, at just the right moment, in this vision, in order to convict him, to warn him. And that is the point of Hebrews 10:26-31. It’s a sobering look at what it would be like for us to deny Jesus. It’s God’s grace, through the lens of warning. We talked about this all the way back in chapter 3. God uses a warning like this, as a Father warns his son not to play in the street, in order to keep us safe and help us endure. And because he is perfect his warnings are perfect, and can keep us perfectly.

In 2 Samuel 24, King David is caught in deliberate sin. His pride causes him to forsake dependence on God, and God comes to him with a choice of punishment. He can be chased by his enemies for three months, or he can choose three days pestilence in the land. David chooses pestilence, because, as he says: “Let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man.” In other words, there are two ways to fall into the hands of God. David sinned, but he did not blaspheme God. He feared God more than man. So although he fell into the hands of God, he knew and trusted in God’s mercy. So God disciplined him, but did not destroy or abandon him.

This is the primary difference between those who are in Christ and those who are not—the man or woman in Christ puts himself in God’s hands by faith, and is safe. The enemy of God tries to take his life into his own hands, and eventually falls into God’s hands anyway. So let me plead with you this morning—if you believe Jesus is the true Son of God, if you believe his blood is the only way to take care of your sins, and if you believe the Holy Spirit of God is God’s means of applying this blood to you—you are not headed for destruction. God will perfectly keep you. You can fall into the hands of the living God.



Recall the Race (32-35)

The second ingredient to endurance is a recollection of God's faithfulness in the past. Notice in the text how the author encourages his audience to "recall former days". The words for "struggle" in **verse 32** is actually where we get our word for "athlete" or "athlete". He images, as the apostle Paul does in his writing, the Christian life as a long endurance race. In this marathon of faith, they started well! They suffered, even publicly. That word "publicly exposed" is a similar word in greek to "theater". In following Jesus, they became public theater for people to mock. They couldn't hide their faith, not did they try to. Instead. They willingly associated with those who were being persecuted.

In a Roman prison, most prisoners had to be provided food and clothing from outside sources. If not, they would risk starving or being fed inedible food or food leading to their sickness and death.² Visitors to the prison would come with whatever they could be allowed in. But if you had no friends—your suffering was only increased. Remember too that this was a heavy honor/shame culture. If you were imprisoned, even if you had family or friends in the city, it was likely that they would abandon you. No one wanted to associate with criminals. And most of all, no one wanted the shame of associating with Christians. Christians were the true pagans—a strange, cultish religion, with no sanction from Rome—they were heathens and outcasts.

In the book of Phillipians, Paul calls the church "partners" in the gospel. Why? Because they visited him and cared for him in prison. So too the author of Hebrews in **verse 33** commends his audience for "being partners" with those in persecution and prison. They were not afraid to risk their own reputation and lives to care for them in prison, to associate with them, to partner with them. The word for "compassion" in **verse 34** is the same used when speaking of Christ as our compassionate high priest. Just as Christ identifies with us in our poor and sinful state, so these Christians had compassion on one another.

This compassion came at great personal cost. Once they were identified as Christians, nothing they owned was safe, and they became the target of hate acts, of the "plundering" of whatever property they had. But notice their disposition in their suffering in **verse 34**: joy. Were you to suffer the loss of your career, your reputation, your financial stability, because of your following Christ—how could you respond with joy? Because you are the inheritor of eternity, of the whole world. John Newton gives an image like this:

Suppose a man was going to New York to take possession of a large estate, and his [carriage] should break down a mile before he got to the city, which obliged him to walk the rest of the way; what a fool we should think him, if we saw him ringing his hands, and blubbering out all the remaining mile, "My [carriage] is broken! My [carriage] is broken!"

² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-47/stench-pain-and-misery.html>



Often I hear Christians young and old lament that they are not as passionate about Christ as they were in the beginning. When they first came to Christ, they were “on fire!” They would give everything away, joyfully accept the plundering of their property. They felt invincible. But the burdens of life wear on them. The realities of their sin persist. Like Peter on the road out of Rome, they are tired.

But the memory of past faithfulness should spur us on towards perseverance, not turn us away. A marathon runner who is struggling at the $\frac{3}{4}$ marker remembers how good they felt at the start, and knows that to give up now would render that past faithfulness worthless. They also know that if they have persevered in the past through great trials, they can face anything in the future.

Last week my wife and I spent some time together to remember all the necessary, providential actions need for us to meet, date, fall in love, and marry. Just one small detail gone the other day, and we would have never met, much less made it to the altar. We were left with a great sense of encouragement to keep persevering in the joys of marriage. In the same way, we are called to remember God’s faithfulness. Remember, church, that he saved you. Remember those feelings of joy and freedom you had for the first time. Remember your conversion, remember your days of boldness child-like faith. And turn again to the same God, the same salvation, to the same, sufficient Christ.

Trust in the Righteous One (35-39)

Not only does looking to the past help our endurance, so does looking forward to the finish line. Hebrews talks alot about the coming of the Lord, and here we have the hope again, that we will “receive” what is promised in just “a little while” Jesus will come “without delay”. When Jesus comes, he will bring the promise of eternal life to fruition.

I don’t know if Paul wrote Hebrews, but this quotation in **verse 37-28** comes from Habakkuk 2, and Paul loved that passage. He uses it in Romans and Galatians to argue that our true righteousness and justification comes not from our work, but from faith. It’s actually Romans 1:7, wherein Paul quotes this passage, that spurred the Reformer Martin Luther to light the spark that would change the church.

Reading this statement: “the righteous shall live by faith” he finally understood the heart of the gospel. What does it mean to live, to persevere, to endure in Christ? It’s not, as Luther first thought, his own world of moral and religious uprightness as a monk. It’s by simple faith in the sufficient work of Jesus Christ.

So there is a link here, between endurance, assurance, and faith. See, too often when we use the image of a marathon or athletic race, we imagine ourselves there, near the finish. Someone tells us: “don’t give up! It would be terrible if you did. You’ve come this far!” And in that moment, what we do is reach down into our deep reserves of strength and grit. Most of us, if pushed, are far too



confident in ourselves. But the kind of marathon we are running cannot be completed by physical strength. You can't endure to the end through force of will. If you only have confidence in yourself, you cannot trust that when the day of true suffering comes, and you are at the end of your rope, that you won't deny Christ in order to save yourself.

True confidence, the kind of confidence that helps us to run towards the cross, not away, the kind of confidence Jesus has, is not about buckling down and pushing through to the finish. It's about faith. It's about trust. Notice in **verse 35**, the author of Hebrews tells this little church that they "have" this confidence. How can you throw away something you don't already possess? And that confidence, the confidence needed to endure, is not found within them, but outside of them. That confidence is faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Jesus endured more than you could ever endure. He carried his cross perfectly. He never shrunk back. He never doubted. He never sinned. He was the perfect righteous one, in whom God was fully pleased. And church, he is calling today, appearing to you in your moment of weakness. "Quo Vadis", we ask: "where are you going, Jesus"? And he answers to us: I have done what you cannot do on your own. I have gone to the cross. Follow me there, trust me, believe me.

Family, you can trust Jesus. You can endure whatever comes. You can take up your cross. You can make it to the end with Jesus. Why? Because **verse 39** is true about you. Not because you have strong backs and broad shoulders. Not because you have trained well. Because you have faith in the one who can and has finally endured everything for you.

