

**Hebrews 10:19-36: Jesus Name Above All Names**

In 336 BC Alexander became King of the Greek city of Macedonia at the age of 20. Over the next 13 years his kingdom became one of the largest empires of the ancient world. Alexander the Great was never defeated in battle.

In 334 BC after his forces landed on the Persian mainland, he instructed his navy to **'burn their ships'** so his men knew they had to fight or die.

The author of Hebrews has been working very hard to persuade his readers not to buckle under the pressure of persecution. These discouraged Christians were in danger of abandoning Jesus and relapsing into an Old Covenant relationship with God.

We've learnt how the Old Testament system was only a shadow of the full deal brought by Jesus. Everything in the Old Testament pointed to the coming of Jesus. Consequently, anyone who rejects the finished work of Jesus and relies on the Old Testament sacrificial system would be walking away from the only way God provides to deal with the sin that separates us from himself.

Hebrews: 10:19 begins with the key word **'therefore'**. That's shortcut for saying 'because of all I have taught you earlier, about the supremacy of Jesus etc, this is what you should do about it' i.e. we're now going from teaching doctrine to application. However, it's not as simple as looking for a bunch of tips for living as a Christian - because the writer has stuck a great big warning right in the middle of his teaching.

The practical lessons come in Verses 22-25 which I will call the three **'let us'** exhortations and then in Verses 32 – 39, we find the **'remember passage.'**

It's almost like the practical tips function as bookends on either side of this warning. In fact, I hope to convince you that is their role – to act as antidotes to the danger being warned of.

So, once again I find myself looking at what this falling away warning is all about. You might recall, when I preached on chapter 6, I said that one possible explanation was the warning referred to God fearers. These people weren't Christians, but they knew enough, so if they rejected Jesus there was no other way they could be saved.

Well, our passage today shoots that argument down. There is no doubt they are Christians - because the author includes himself in the group being warned:

Verse 26: if WE deliberately keep on sinning after WE have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left.

If we **deliberately** keep on sinning. In a sense every sin is deliberate. However, the writer is not talking about those sins of commission and omission we Anglicans confess each week in Church – as serious as those sins may be – Phew! That's a relief.

Rather deliberate sin is rejecting the foundational actions God took when he reached out to restore us to himself. Listen to how it is described in V.29 as **someone who tramples the son of God underfoot, treats the blood of the covenant as unholy and insults the Holy Spirit**. This is talking about someone who once knew God, but later rejected his gracious gift of forgiveness; someone who cheapens and ridicules the price Jesus paid through his death and resurrection.

The writer warns, if we denounce the only method God has provided for dealing with sin then we should expect the same judgment as an unbeliever – someone who never accepted God's grace in the first place: **a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God** – as the passage says.

That sounds as clear an image of hell as anywhere in the Bible.

Lest his readers have any doubts as to God's willingness to make good on His threat, the author goes on to recall the fate of those who rejected the law and more particularly the authority of Moses (v.28). If the penalty back then was death without mercy, how much more seriously will God respond to those who reject Jesus, the one infinitely greater than Moses?

"Vengeance is mine" says the Lord, **"I will repay"** and **"The Lord will judge His people"** - two quotations from Deuteronomy.

The writer warns these Christians not to abandon Jesus by returning to their former Jewish practices. It's not a new idea, but rather is a message we have been hearing throughout Hebrews. Jesus is superior to everything in the Old Testament, so why would you even think about rejecting him?

I think we all get that. But the question remains, why talk about judgment here? Why include such a dire warning in the middle of what would otherwise be a nice pastoral caring – 'tips for living' - section?

The certainty of judgment may not cause unbelievers to repent. There are many people in the world who have no interest in the things of God, judgment, or no judgment. However, it provides powerful motivation for those who care about their relationship with God. The author is not dangling his readers over the pit to terrify them. Rather, he is seeking to strengthen and encourage their faith. At the same time, he is mindful of those Christians who seem to be growing weary of the Christian life: "Stop thinking how much easier life might be as a non-Christian! Would you really want that fate?"

Whatever the theological implications of this warning, there is one clear message for every Christian, then and now. When Alexander ordered his army to burn their boats, the soldiers knew there was no plan B. His army was effective because their commitment was unconditional. They knew there was no turning back.

So, the message for us is - maintain your Christian commitment! Once you became a child of God there is no turning back. So, stop vacillating! Being concerned sometimes about our Christian growth and maturity and getting our quiet times under control, and then later allowing ourselves to relax – take it easy – and drift along. If you accept there is no turning back in the Christian life, then the message from Hebrews is very clear and simple – Just get on with it!

So now, we finally come to the practical bookends on either side of this dire warning, (which I have already flagged), bookends that operate as antidotes to the danger of falling away.

Verse 22: Let us draw near to God

This encouragement wouldn't be given unless it was necessary. These discouraged Christians had many problems — persecution, difficult relationships, unjust imprisonment, confiscation of their property. However, it seems the greatest threat was in their

relationship with God. They needed to understand how much had changed under Jesus. Earlier we read how the curtain in the temple – which separated us from the Holy of the Holies – the place where God was meant to live – had been torn in two from top to bottom. The barrier between man and God has been removed. Christians can now draw near to God in a way never available to someone under the Old Covenant – with the assurance that faith brings - knowing we are forgiven and are clean/pure in God's sight.

Verse 23: 'Let us hold **unswervingly** to the hope we profess. Unswervingly refers to an **upright object, not inclining at all from the true perpendicular**.

A spirit level is only useful if it remains true. There is no place in the Christian life for a hope that bounces between faith and doubt. Or in Alexander speak – there is no place for compromise – because there is no turning back. The reason we can remain strong is because God is faithful. It's better to trust in His faithfulness, rather than our own!

Verse 24: Let us ...**spur one another on toward love and good deeds**. Both love and good deeds presuppose the existence of a community. As one commentator noted "**Faith and hope can be practiced alone, in a hermit's cell or on a desert island. But love and good deeds are only possible around other people**". It seems discouragement - and possibly the fear of further persecution - caused these Jewish Christians to avoid meeting together, at the very time they needed the support of other people.

Engagement with one another takes time to develop. Our one hour together on Sundays can only take us so far. Spurring one another on involves encouraging, building, engaging. Stimulating – perhaps even extending to challenge and rebuke. If you are not engaging with other Christians - if you are just showing up – there's a good chance you may eventually dis-engage and drift from God. Remember Jesus' promise in Mathew 18:20; **Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them**. Jesus joins us, as we meet with one another, to stir up love and good works.

The second bookend comes immediately after the falling away warning. Suddenly and unexpectedly the author switches from judgment to encouragement. Verse: 32

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering.

Did you notice the change of pronoun from "we" in the warning passage to "You"? This wasn't the first time they had faced hardship. There was no need to refer to some hypothetical example. Much better to be reminded of their own faithful response to persecution in the past.

Verse 36: **"You need to persevere**. You did it before. Now amidst an even greater challenge, where the basis of your relationship with God is under challenge, hang on in! Sometimes, moving forward is best achieved by first looking back – to where we have come from.

And then comes this final word of assurance in Verse: 39 where the author once more reverts to including himself and others: **But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved**.

Whatever he intended in his earlier dire warning, the author has confidence his readers, like himself, will endure, to the end.

As we read this letter, our circumstances are not the same as the original audience. They were in a situation where their Christian profession regularly made them a target for abuse and humiliation, for imprisonment, for theft - and even worse. For them, being a Christian was a risky business. Persecution could easily explain the temptation to abandon their faith. We live in a different world, although terrible persecution persists in some countries.

In whatever circumstances we might find ourselves - whether persecution, or distraction, or worldliness, or idolatry, or broken-heartedness - the admonitions remain the same:

Let us draw near to God; Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess; Let us spur one another on towards love and good deeds.

The Spanish conquistador, Hernán Cortés, was another warrior who adopted the Alexander the Great – ‘no plan B’ - approach. In 1519 as they began their conquest of the Aztec empire, he also ordered his men to burn their boats. Like Alexander, he was also successful. While such a tactic has inherent risks, perhaps it also provides some helpful lesson for us: unconditional commitment is a powerful motivator.

Whatever issues we might face in our Christian lives, live as if there is no turning back; because when we put our trust in God, there is no need for a plan B!