

SCRIPTURE  SHARED



Jesus: Greater Than

a study of Hebrews

Week 4: Instructions for Living

Day 1: Suffering with Hope

Hebrews 10:26-39 (New Revised Standard Version)

²⁶ For if we willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. ²⁸ Anyone who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy "on the testimony of two or three witnesses." ²⁹ How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? ³⁰ For we know the one who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." ³¹ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

³² But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, ³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. ³⁴ For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting. ³⁵ Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. ³⁶ For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. ³⁷ For yet

*"in a very little while,
the one who is coming will come and will not delay;*

³⁸ but my righteous one will live by faith.

My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back."

³⁹ But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved.

Understanding the Passage:

Even though the author and audience are not exactly known, one cannot ignore that the audience lived within a hostile environment. These Jewish Christians were being persecuted for their faith by being put in jail and being tortured as many are to this day around the world. In a simple reading to this passage and others in Hebrews, one can infer that alliance to Christ (probably instead of the government ruler) was not tolerated. It's important to note that these were not people who were allowed to pray, congregate, or worship even in the privacy of their own homes as we can in America. To have Christ as one's Lord was radical, illegal, and they would come for you and your loved ones if anyone found out.

It benefits us to keep the exact meaning of this hostile environment very clear when studying this passage. Misunderstanding their persecution could tempt us to think of ourselves as victims unnecessarily. We are free to hold our Christian beliefs both privately and publicly. Though there is increasing room for all religions to be practiced in our society and it feels like Christianity is not at the center, it is nothing like this environment the audience was living within. However, it's not necessary for us to intimately identify with their pain/suffering in order for us to have access to the hope of Jesus Christ. However, we can still identify with their suffering in the way that life in this broken world brings suffering—disease, death, economic strife, the list goes on. Identifying the difference between their suffering and our own is important so that we can take it to Jesus. We may not identify with their suffering, but we can identify with their hope. The specific details of suffering may be different, but the hope is the same. Jesus is the same.

We suffer with hope. We don't shrink back from the hardship life brings, but we suffer as ones who know Christ suffers along with us. Don't hear me wrong, there is a time to grieve, mourn, take time off or take a reset, but we do so as ones who know that God's hands hold us in everything. God holds us safe in our troubles, heartbreaks, struggles, etc. So in the long term we don't shrink back from life's challenges. They don't have the final say in how things end up. Instead, we draw near to God and move forward to build the Kingdom of God in all areas of our life.

Discussion Questions:

1. Reflect and discuss ways in which our allegiance can shift to someone or something else? Resist only talking about how this happens in others. Stick to examining your own heart and share with your group.
2. How does suffering manifest for you today or how has it recently? Why is it important that we identify our own suffering and not simply power through? (Hint: It has to do with Jesus being the one who saves.)
3. Without offering the "Sunday School answer," discuss the hope that Jesus Christ brings you and those who suffer. Go deep. What does it mean to suffer with hope?

Day 2: A Faithful Prospect of Judgement Hebrews 10:26-39 (New Revised Standard Version)

²⁶ For if we willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. ²⁸ Anyone who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy "on the testimony of two or three witnesses." ²⁹ How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? ³⁰ For we know the one who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." ³¹ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

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Understanding the Passage:

In keeping with the theme of a greater covenant established through Christ, the writer of Hebrews offers a warning: receiving and ignoring the knowledge of the truth will bear results worse than the results of violating the Law of Moses—literally, a fate worse than death. Fearful indeed! But if we skip to verse 39 we see that faith plays a huge role in judgement. It’s with Jesus that we move from a fearful prospect of judgement to a faithful one.

However, this is why Jesus came! The good news is that we have been enlightened by the knowledge of the truth—we have received it, and it didn’t fall to the wayside. The readers of this letter have received it and to this day the Holy Spirit brings us wisdom, understanding and guidance. We continue to grow in our faith and be enlightened, as the author writes. We can draw on our past experiences of God, we can draw on the hardships we have endured with God’s help, in order to resist sin and not willfully persist in sin. As we continually walk the path of faith we are fortified against sin while also receiving strength to flee it and break the cycle. The knowledge of love we received through Christ is greater than any earthly possession, and worth more than any sinful behavior in which we might engage.

The call, then, is to take strength from our memory of our earliest encounter with the one who is greater than, and to move forward in the strength of that encounter. We live by faith, and in so doing we do not shrink back from the call of this fearful God. We instead move forward, confident in our “kinship by covenant.” We have been made sons and daughters by the exchange of our promises with God, and we move in this world in light of our changed relationship with God, moving forward under the covering of the sacrifice for sins made by Jesus Christ.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are ways that we can continue to grow in our faith? How have you grown in your faith over the years? (perhaps through struggle, study, serving, Christian community, temptation, etc.)
2. What was the first memorable encounter with God? Was it a single moment or was it many moments that hindsight revealed God’s presence? Share with your group about how/if these experiences strengthened your faith or not. (Hint: The only wrong answer is one that’s not fully honest.)
3. What does it mean to be made daughters and sons of the most-high God? How might this impact the way in which we move through life?

Day 3: From Preaching to Meddling

Hebrews 13:1-6 (New Revised Standard Version)

13 Let mutual love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³ Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured ⁴ Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. ⁵ Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." ⁶ So we can say with confidence,

"The Lord is my helper;

I will not be afraid.

What can anyone do to me?"

⁷Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Understanding the Passage:

Have you ever had your toes stepped on by your pastor? Left church on a Sunday with your feathers ruffled? Congratulations, you've joined with Christians for thousands of years in receiving conviction from the Holy Spirit! Imagine reading this letter from a leader. I wonder if the audience feels like, "the preacher has just gone from preaching to meddling."

There is a stark shift in tone as the book of Hebrews comes to a close. The author moves from deep theological teaching to direct instructions or exhortations on how to live with one another. Verses 1-3 address peace and mutual concern that become more explicit—hospitality and participation in suffering with those who suffer. Verses 4-6 then address personal behavior and sexual conduct. Verse 6 reminds the reader that we indeed have divine guidance which brings hope amidst the challenges of the Christian life.

Well-meaning Christians often approach Scripture with the motivation of looking for instructions on how to live. Many Scripture passages have been interpreted in dangerous ways because of just such a hermeneutic. We innocently are seeking to live how God wants us to—plainly speaking we are searching for the dos and don'ts of our faith. The Christian faith is indeed much more robust than a list of dos and don'ts. The New Covenant brings this concept directly to our front door. With Christ there is grace—grace that guides, helps discern, provides wisdom in order to help us use our free will to follow Jesus as best we know how. That is some of the biggest challenges of the faith and the church universal continues to fight and disagree about the dos and don'ts (translated as doctrine).

That being said, this passage contains therein some pretty straightforward, uncomplicated instruction on how to live in covenantal community with other Christians. So how do we not turn this passage into a simplistic message for a sticky note in our day timer? We take this list and let it be undergirded by the New Covenant of grace.

The first line is paramount, "Let mutual love continue." *Adelphoi* or brotherly love is inclusively translated here as mutual love. This is love among siblings. This is a love that has no hierarchy within it. It is a love and care that extends to those on equal footing, those who all stand equal as disciples of Jesus Christ. This type of love is uncommon outside of Christian community in which persons are not natural blood relations. These verses make

it clear that these instructions are for what happens within the community. This is the value from which all other values stem.

Then the writer moves to a call to remember those who are in prison and also to suffer along with them. For if one part of the ecclesial body of Christ suffers, all suffer as well (1 Corinthians 12). Those in prison are there for being Christian. Then the author addresses marriage, sex, money and power. From preaching to meddling.

So what exactly is the meaning of all of this? This is a connection back to the New Covenant; the better covenant of which Christ is the mediator. Christians are to live in a distinct way that is different than the outer world because we have Jesus and Jesus has us. A blessed assurance has a reach unlike anything else. Flowing out of this assurance comes a new way of life. This is a new way of life that turns us outward to care for those outside of our blood relations. We direct this love to the whole body of Christ. So that others can also be saved.

Discussion Questions:

1. Share and discuss with your group which of the commands in this passage “ruffle your feathers” or cause you to pause. Reflect and share why it might stir up something in you.
2. Are the overarching themes of these commands? What’s the bigger message here?
3. If these exhortations are for covenant Christian community how might these commands be expressed by us today?

Day 4: A Sacrifice of Praise

Hebrews 13:9-16 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁹ Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food,^[a] which have not benefited those who observe them. ¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent^[b] have no right to eat. ¹¹ For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. ¹² Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. ¹³ Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. ¹⁴ For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. ¹⁵ Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Understanding the Passage:

Do not be carried away by strange teachings is a piece of advice that stands the test of time. Here it is referring to the Pagan cultic zeitgeist that permeated ancient culture. The author moved from direct, somewhat straight forward exhortations to one that requires a little deciphering for modern readers.

Traditional scholarship has commonly rejected this passage as one that inform Eucharistic Theology, that is our understanding of Holy Communion. However, more modern scholarship has begun to challenge this position. This section is explicitly naming sacrifice rituals of the Old Covenant as it points this Jewish Christian community toward the New Covenant. Christ is the new the spotless lamb that was sacrificed outside the city gates. The author of the Book of Hebrews has endeavored to make clear that Jesus has not abolished ritual per se, but the cultic rituals of the Old Covenant. An altar from which those

who officiate in the tent have no right to eat? This is not to say that no one should participate in ritual, i.e., the partaking of the sacrifice or the eating of the body broken for sin, but it points to the creation of a new ritual: the Eucharist (The Lord's Supper). Jesus is the body that was sacrificed for sin, and he resides outside of the tent—that is to say, outside of the ritual of the Old Covenant. We come to Christ and partake of the offering for sin through the ritual of the Eucharist. In partaking in this ritual instituted by Christ and other rituals of the Christian faith, we discard the old ineffectual Covenant in favor of the new effectual Covenant.

We hew close to the new effectual Covenant by partaking in its rituals specifically so that we don't stray from the path, tempted by strange teachings. No teachings about food or anything else should distract us, for they are certainly secondary if applicable at all. This passage speaks to our hope in the sacrifice of Christ, that it might be a source of strength for us in order to endure "the abuse he endured." That it would tide us over as we wait for the "city that is to come," that is, Heaven come down to Earth. As a people who wait for the city that is to come, we should continue on in our good works—not to earn the city that is to come, or even to earn our place in the city that is to come, but to express our gratitude for Christ and indeed to draw others near. And when we share the good things that we have, the material and the spiritual, we offer a sacrifice pleasing to God in the same way that Christ offered a sacrifice pleasing to God. The Eucharist, then, is both a source of grace and a teacher. It is the example of Christ offering a sacrifice pleasing to God on our behalf, that we might offer good things to others as a sacrifice pleasing to God—a sacrifice of praise.

Discussion Questions:

1. Find the commands and instructions in this section of Scripture. Discuss how they might look for us today?
2. How do other parts of Scripture inform us to live as we "await the city that is to come?"
3. What is the New Covenant? Discuss its impacts for Christians today.

Day 5- What a Goodbye

Hebrews 13:17-25 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you.

¹⁸ Pray for us; we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. ¹⁹ I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you very soon.

²⁰ Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, ²¹ make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

²² I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. ²³ I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been set free; and if he comes in time, he will be with me when I see you. ²⁴ Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy send you greetings. ²⁵ Grace be with all of you.

Understanding the Passage:

As the book of Hebrews comes to a close, we see a continuation of final instructions concerning leaders and then into a formal goodbye. This is often called a benediction—a kind of blessing and salutation. The author is saying goodbye. And what a goodbye it is.

This goodbye has so much theology packed into just two verses. Verses 20-21 declare many aspects of God. First, the God of peace. Though this is not definitively written by Paul, this phrasing is often used in Paul's epistle benedictions. This moniker calls back to the sections of this epistle on peace (12:14) and how to achieve it (13:1-2,7, 17-18).

Next is a declaration about what God did—brought back Jesus from the dead. This statement is interesting because it is alluded to and is obviously foundational to the Christian faith, but this is the first time it is mentioned explicitly in this letter.

Jesus is then declared the great shepherd of the sheep. Again, shepherd imagery is not utilized anywhere in the book except here. However, the word "great" is used the section (4:14, 10:21) on Christ as the high priest. This would be fresh on the reader's mind. This is a nod that we have moved from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. God as a shepherd is often the relationship between God and Israel found in the Old Testament. Now Christ is the great shepherd. This beautifully sets up the next phrase.

The blood of the eternal covenant makes us complete. "May the blood make you complete in every good thing." However, when one is made complete it moves us into action. The blood of this New Covenant doesn't just have eternal implications, but it has real-life, right now kind of implications. The good work of Jesus on the cross, in the grave, and in the resurrection saves us now by empowering us to do God's will. The reader may recall that in 10:5-7, Christ was given a body to do God's will. It is not only God who equips the Christian for obedience to God's will, but it is also God who works in and among us to accomplish what is pleasing to God (verse 21:b).

What a goodbye. So much meaning stuffed into two verses. It sounds really theological and heady, but for us it's really quite simple. That benediction was all about God—who God is, what God does, What God will do for us. The author doesn't close the letter with, now make sure you behave yourselves. Instead, the author says, "Bask in the glory of the one who will do so much in, around and through you." For the readers of this sermon letter the goodbye is full of grace, heavy full-to-the-brim, overflowing, grace. May we receive the same.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does this last section of the letter tell us about God? What is God's job?
2. What does this last section tell us about ourselves as Christ followers? What is our job?
3. How does the closing of this letter connect back to some of the larger themes of the book of Hebrews?
4. Will you receive a fresh measure of God's grace in this moment? Where in your life do you need it?

Video Discussion Questions:

1. What does 'suffering with hope' mean to you after having moved through the book of Hebrews? What is the hope with which we suffer?
2. How does suffering turn us to Jesus? Share about how this has occurred in your life.
3. Does suffering with hope mature one's faith? How?
4. What is the role of empathy in the life of the Christian?
5. Share with your group your thoughts on 10:27-28.
6. In the Christian faith how do judgement and grace intersect? (hint: verse 10:39)
7. What are the commands or "to-dos" found in 13:13-17? Why is context important when reading this passage?
8. Why can we not create universal rules out of these few verses?
9. Share with your group parts of Scripture that you might have viewed as the 'dos and don'ts' of the faith. How might you interpret them differently in light of our study?

Prayer requests and other notes: