

STUDIES IN HEBREWS No. 22

Hebrews 12:1-13

November 10, 2002

The preacher has just set before his hearers the long line of faithful saints who have persevered in faith in defiance of not having received in their lifetime what God had promised them. Do what they did, he is telling them as chapter 12 begins. Keep believing; your faith will in due time receive its reward. We have the promise of the God who cannot lie, and, further, we have the guarantee of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the guarantor of the new covenant.

We've been saying these last Lord's Day evenings that in Hebrews, as in the rest of the Bible, faith is the key, faith comes first. There is doing to be sure – obedience and service – but only the doing that comes from believing will please God or advance his kingdom. We must aspire to be great believers before we aspire to be great doers. That is what it means to be a Christian, to be someone who looks not to himself but to another and what that other has done for his eternal life. That was, for some chapters, this preacher's theme, remember: the priesthood of Jesus Christ and how it was that *he* saved his people completely, not only through what he did on the cross, offering himself as a sacrifice for our sin, but also still today in interceding for us, and finally at the end of history when he comes to bring his salvation to all who eagerly await his coming because they trust in him.

There was a popular hymn in the 19th century that went like this:

Nothing either great or small,
Nothing, sinner, no;
Jesus did it, did it all,
Long, long ago.

Cast your deadly doing down,
Down at Jesus' feet;
Stand in Him, in Him alone,
Gloriously complete.

Richard Hurrell Froude (1803-1836), one of the early leaders of the Oxford Movement, the high church, Romanizing movement in English Anglicanism in the second quarter of the 19th century, criticized that hymn severely. He argued that its sentiment was immoral. It is only by "doing" he said that the work of the world can ever get done. If "doing" is said to be "deadly" then a premium has been placed on indolence and inactivity and the possibilities of spiritual achievement have been greatly diminished.

But, of course, the whole witness of chapter 11 is to the contrary, as is the entire witness of the Bible. Believing in the finished work of Jesus Christ, trusting to his work and not to one's own doing, has never made people indolent or inactive. It has, to the contrary, set them mightily to work. Look at Hebrews 11 and at church history since and the lesson is the same. The more completely one counts on Christ and his work rather than on one's own, the more prodigious a

“toiler” he becomes and the more he accomplishes in the world. [See F. Boreham, *A Frank Boreham Treasury*, 135-135]

If we heed the message of Hebrews we will aspire to be greater believers first and last. If we believe as we should, trust the Lord to be true to his promises, the doing will come apace! That is the power and the virtue of true faith. It draws the entire life behind it.

As Hartley Coleridge has it in a poem,

Think not faith by which the just shall live
Is a dead creed, a map correct of heaven,
Far less a feeling fond and fugitive,
A thoughtless gift, withdrawn as soon as given;
It is an affirmation and an act,
That binds eternal truth to present fact.

v.1 The “therefore” with which v. 12 begins connects its thought to what has gone before. Do what they did, is his point, persevere in faith in Christ as they did, and take encouragement from the fact that they have finished their race and, as it were, are cheering you on. This is what is known as the home-team advantage.

The second half of v. 12, by the way, is an important statement of the fundamental role of self-denial and self-discipline in a godly life.

v.3 Jesus Christ, in other words, is our example in this. He endured in prospect of later joys and that is what we must do. His faith was rewarded and so will ours be. What is more, the opposition these Jewish Christians were suffering on account of their faith in Christ is not to be compared with the opposition he himself had to endure during the days of his ministry.

v.4 That is, they haven’t suffered as Jesus did, or even as many faithful men and women did who paid the supreme sacrifice for their loyalty to Christ (as we read in 11:37).

v.6 Yes, things have been difficult for you, but this testing of your faith is from the Lord, who intends your good by it and not your harm.

v.7 Any true father disciplines his children and cultivates their maturity by requiring of them the endurance of adversity.

v.13 Though painful at the time, the heavenly Father’s discipline will yield its perfect fruit in their lives if they submit to it as from the Lord and look to him for the help to endure and surmount their trials. In the confidence that such trials must litter the straight and narrow road that leads to life, they must press on and not give up. There is no alternative.

A few weeks back Rob and I attended a soccer match at the Olympic Stadium in Munich. The match pitted Bayern Munich, one of the premier teams in the world, against Hannover, another team of the German Bundesliga. European countries being smaller than the United States, there

is a tradition of fans following their teams to away matches. We were sitting near the end of one of the sides of the oval stadium, and the Hannover fans were sitting to our left, occupying the nearest end of the oval. Bayern scored first and the stadium erupted in terrific noise, shouting, whistles, horns, waving flags, all that one associates with European football matches. But, look left, at the Hannover end of the stadium and all is still and quiet. No motion, no noise at all. Shortly thereafter, Hannover, everyone's underdog in this match, scored a goal against the run of play. The stadium as a whole fell silent and motionless. Except that one end, closest to us, it was a sea of movement as the hands went up, the flags began to wave, men began to sing and shout. There were four more goals scored in the match, two by Bayern and two by Hannover, and each time it was the same: great cheers and celebration, the waving of flags, the singing of songs by the fans of the team that had scored, silence and motionlessness by the fans whose team had been scored against. When Hannover scored its goals, its players would run to the end of the stadium where its fans were and accept their praises and stir them up to a greater frenzy of support.

Well, that is a picture like the one our preacher paints in the opening verse of chapter 12. You have an arena full of fans cheering you on. He doesn't say it, but he might have. You have another group hoping for your defeat who are also looking on as you run your race. The devil and his legions are there also. But your fans are those men and women of whom the world is not worthy, whose example of faith in trial is so stirring, and who are calling on you to do nothing but what they themselves have already done. The others just want you to lose. That should nerve us, steel us, make us determined that we are not going to give up now, but see the race through to its end. And, if that is not enough, we have the example of the Lord Jesus himself to strengthen and inspire us. His race was not easy, the farthest thing from it, but he ran it in faith and prevailed and now sits at the right hand of God. If we run faithfully we must prevail as he did.

Look to those who are cheering you on, he says – as he has said throughout chapter 11 – and, still more, look to the Lord himself, take heart and persevere. And, then, he says, remember, that when troubles and opposition and setbacks come, they are also from the Lord. They are not proof that he has failed you, they are the demonstration of his fatherly love. Faith knows this.

I have been thinking new thoughts about sanctification these past some years, in large part as a result of reading the Old Testament with new eyes. Those narratives of the life and times of God's people have so much more to show us about God's ways with his people than I had known before.

You may remember my having told you about the remark made to me by a Dutch professor of theology when I was studying in Holland in 1984. We were speaking about the Reformed catechisms and he said that he felt that the Heidelberg Catechism represented the springtime of the Reformation and that the Westminster Shorter Catechism represented the Autumn of the Reformation. I didn't like his remark then because it seemed to reflect poorly on my own catechism, but the longer I have thought about it and used both catechisms, the more I take his point.

You see the difference in a variety of ways. The Heidelberg Catechism is written in the first and second persons, the Shorter Catechism in the third. “What is *your* only comfort in life and in death?” begins the one; “What is the chief end of man?” begins the other. The Heidelberg Catechism is simpler, takes up fewer doctrinal issues, and is less precise. The Shorter Catechism, written two generations later, takes into account the doctrinal struggles of those years and provides more technical and detailed definitions for doctrines.

Take, for example the difference between these two questions having to do with sanctification or the Christian life. First the Heidelberg:

“What do you believe concerning the forgiveness of sins? I believe that God, because of Christ’s atonement, will never hold against me any of my sins nor my sinful nature *which I need to struggle against all my life*. Rather, in his grace God grants me the righteousness of Christ to free me forever from judgment.” [56]

“We have been delivered from our misery by God’s grace alone through Christ and not because we have earned it: why then must we still do good? To be sure, Christ has redeemed us by his blood. But we do good because Christ by his Spirit is also renewing us to be like himself, so that in all our living we may show that we are thankful to God for all he has done for us, and so that he may be praised through us. And we do good so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and so that by our godly living our neighbors may be won over to Christ.” [86]

In comparison, we have the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

“What is sanctification? Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man, after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness.”

The Shorter Catechism answer is certainly less personal than the Heidelberg’s and tells us less about what this Christian life will be like, but it is accurate enough. The problem is that it says too little and creates a misunderstanding. The suggestion is that the Christian life is a steady ascent in holiness; every day, in every way we are getting better and better. And, of course, sanctification is not like that at all, certainly not in the Bible.

One grows in grace in the Bible through a series of crises and plateaus. The Bible, in fact, usually just gives us the crises. Look back over its biography and see if that is not the case. We learn about a man’s life, or a woman’s, usually only at the point of crisis. We are told what happens in those crises. We are not given an account of the ordinary run of his days and nights. Abraham’s life, for example, or Moses’, or David’s is the story of their crises. Remember the three crises at the end of 1 Samuel, three successive opportunities for David to exact revenge on Saul, that make David finally a man fit to be Israel’s king. Crises and faith growing through crises made the man.

What is more, there is as much waning as waxing in the biblical account of the Christian life. We recently finished David’s life and found the latter half of it a slow decline, a decline that was

itself marked by failures at points of crisis. We finish with a more than faintly pathetic David, rather than with the hero of his earlier personal history. Indeed, we said that one scholar thinks that Samuel ends when it does and does not include the account of David's final days because that was a story too dismal to relate. Crises made him and crises weakened him because he did not sturdily believe in them and through them.

That is sanctification, that is the Christian life in the Bible and it is crises that tell the tale. And that is what we have in Hebrews. They had faced crises before and had handled them heroically and faithfully. They had suffered opposition, they were insulted, their property was confiscated, and all because they were Christians. But now another round of opposition and various pressures had begun and they were beginning to waver.

How will the story of their Christian life be written? Will the crisis reveal them to have no faith or very weak faith, will it damage their Christian life, or will it bring out of them a stronger, sturdier, more inflexible loyalty to the Lord Jesus? That is the question and it is always the question of the Christian life. Because, God, being the Father that he is, will not leave us without tests, which is to say, without crises. Crises met or not met, that will always tell the tale and meeting crises with faith is how faith grows and men and women grow in grace and the knowledge of the Lord. Taking the Bible as whole, it appears that there is little significant spiritual growth that occurs in any other way.

I'm preaching to myself now, as much as to you. When crises come, as they will, setbacks, opposition, disappointments, troubles, it is not the time to cave! It is the time, rather, to lick one's chops and rub one's hands. Our lives have reached a point of testing, a point of growth. The Lord is now at work in our lives to advance our holiness and his interests in our hearts. Now is the time to take a great leap forward, now comes the opportunity for our lives to change in the best and the holiest ways, as our faith is tested and vindicated. But will it be? Only if we practice our faith through the trial, only if we persevere in the face of difficulty.

That is the argument being laid before us and made to us this evening. Multitudes of other believers have proved that when they trusted the Lord in times of difficulty they prevailed and they now gather around us in the spiritual world to urge us on to prove the same. Jesus Christ himself believed through his trials and now he sits at the Right Hand of God. We have been told to expect trials and to receive them as the loving discipline of our heavenly Father. So, when trials come, it is not the time to waver in faith, but to renew our faith, to practice it with a vengeance, sure that the Lord will prove us right in due time as he always has proved his faithful people right, as he proved his Son the most right of all.