

May 31, 2015

Full Assurance of Hope

Hebrews 6:1 – 12

We've been going through the book of Hebrews that was written to some 1st century urban Christians who were struggling with hardship and loss in their lives and wondering whether or not they should just forget about this Christian thing and go back to Moses and the Law. They're wrestling with the question: 'If God loves us so much, why are we in this pickle?' They're in the wilderness; they're in the desert, and there's no food, there's no water, and they want to go back. And the writer is constantly reminding them that the only way through this wilderness is to keep their eyes on Jesus – He's the final word, He's better than the prophets, or the angels or Moses; He's our King, our Captain, our Brother and our great High Priest. He knows our weaknesses, He sympathizes with our struggles; He endured the unendurable and came through to victory. Therefore He is able to save. Keep looking to Him.

And interspersed with some sweet promises, the writer pens some stern warnings: 'Don't drift away from the gospel – don't neglect this great salvation. Watch out that you don't get hardened by the deceitfulness of sin and fall away – keep encouraging each other. Today if you hear His voice, don't harden your heart. Don't stop short of the rest. Don't be dull of hearing'. And last week we heard him say, 'Stop playing in your crib and eating baby food. Grow up and start eating adult food'. And he's not just interested their maturity for the sake of maturity. He's saying 'Grow up – it is crucial that you grow up. It is vital that you grow up. Your eternal destiny hangs on whether you grow up or not'. Because here in chapter six, he goes on to describe two opposite conclusions. From 6:1 to 6:12, he talks about two very different futures that absolutely depend on you growing and not staying in the baby stage. He talks about one kind of assurance that ends in everlasting fire and another kind of assurance that ends in everlasting glory. He's telling them how to have the full assurance of hope that they will make it all the way through to the end.

This passage has probably cause more consternation and lent itself to more interpretations than almost any other passage in the New Testament. And it has been said that there is no difficult passage of Scripture that any decent preacher with a minimum of effort cannot make more difficult. But we will try not to do that this morning, and with the Lord's help I trust that you will come away from this message with more understanding and not less. He starts by saying, '*Therefore let us leave the elementary* [or basic] *doctrine of Christ*'. But this immediately presents somewhat of a problem for the discerning reader because as we read last week in chapter 5 he says, '*For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic* [or elementary] *principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food*'. And now he says, 'Stop going over the basic things again.' So which is it? Go over the basics, or stop going over the basics?

I think it looks like this: someone comes to Christ and for a season enjoys the many blessings of new life in Christ without much suffering or persecution or hardship. And then as they begin to take steps to grow in this life, hard things come that cause them to retreat and question and in many cases give up. And they either walk away or remain immature babies. And the writer is saying 'It is time to grow up. It's time to put what you know into practice. Don't keep coming back to the first things and laying that foundation again'. One of the most popular aquarium fish is the shark, because if you catch a small shark and confine it, it will stay a size proportionate to the aquarium you put it in. Sharks can be six inches long yet look fully grown. But if you turn them loose in the ocean, they grow to their normal length of eight feet. That is like what happens to some Christians. You can see some of the cutest little six-inch Christians who swim around in their little church aquarium, perfectly happy to stay that way indefinitely. Not growing, always the student, never the teacher, existing on the basics, not solid food. It is time to stop being a six-inch Christian. The need is not to rebuild a foundation of basic truths, but to take those truths and live by them, and grow to maturity.

That is exactly what he says, *and go on to maturity*. The phrase here, '*go on to maturity*', as Ben mentioned last week, is in the passive voice. It means that you are being acted upon. In other words it means something or someone is doing the work and you are cooperating in that work. This word carries the connotation of enduring a thing until the completed time.

That is, this a **work carried on to completion to produce a desired result through enduring everything necessary to bring it to pass.** And if there is one thing in the Christian life that is vital and necessary it is perseverance or endurance. Jesus tells His disciples in Matthew 24:13 that *'Those who endure to the end will be saved.'* And the writer of Hebrews says in 10:36 that, *For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.* In other words, our endurance, our going on, is the key to not only maturity but our salvation. That is, the proof that we have truly been converted in the first place is that we endure. And endurance implies the passage of time. Maturity does not happen overnight. It takes time to grow an oak from an acorn; it takes time for a pear tree to produce pears; it takes time to grow an infant into an adult – and if the process is short-circuited at any point along the way, the end result is stunted growth, or no growth.

Maturity takes time and perseverance and it takes opposition. James tells us that it is testing or opposition that produces endurance. *'...and you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance.'* Opposition serves to develop and build our spiritual muscles. When I was in Jr. High, my basketball coach bought into a new conditioning program that was sweeping the country at that time. It was a little device called the 'Exer-genie'. This wonderful tool of exercise torture worked on the principle of resistance. You set the control on this thing to resist your efforts to a certain level and kept working it up until you could do all the exercises at the highest level of resistance. We all had one issued to us and we spent the first half-hour of every practice torturing ourselves with these things.

Now some of the guys figured out that since we controlled the equipment, we were the only ones who knew what level they were set on. And while most of the guys were diligently working their pieces, these other guys were putting on a show of hard work. But one day everything was revealed because we had a test. When we began this exercise regimen, we had done a series of tests that measured leg and arm strength and jumping ability – so we had a baseline to go by. The guys who diligently worked the program all did at least 50% better on the test. But for the guys who had been putting on a show and not putting in the work, there was little or no change. And we learned at least two significant truths: the first being, ***be sure your sin will find you out***; and the second, ***there is no growth without struggle.*** C.S. Lewis once observed that ***'It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.'***

We grow through struggle and striving and opposition. Physically we know that we don't develop muscle while sitting on the couch. The same is true spiritually. In a sense, we need problems more than solutions. Why are not all our prayers answered immediately? Why do we need to keep rehearsing the gospel? Why can't we wave a biblical wand and solve all our problems? It is because the very things that cause us pain and sweat and hardship work to develop our endurance and our trust in the God who is sovereign over all our problems. The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once said that a lot of Christians reminded him of schoolboys who want to look up the answers to their math problems in the back of the book rather than work them through. We live for shortcuts. But shortcuts do not promote growth. Remember Job? At the end of his ordeal we see a faith emerge that is unshakeable. And we say, 'Give me a faith like that!' But we fail to understand that Job's faith was unshakeable only ***because*** he persevered through the shaking. He had an unshakeable faith because everything that could be shaken had been shaken out.

We also need to recognize something else here in this text that is vital for our growth – the sovereign hand of God. The writer says that growing believers should not be *'...laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God. 2 and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. 3 And this we will do if God permits.* In other words, we will grow, if God permits. We will go on to maturity – ***if God permits.*** On the one hand, we should be growing. On the other, all growth is up to God. We have to understand that both work together. We must grow, but God is in control of all our growth. This is a difficult concept to understand but this is something we see all through the Bible. God is sovereign over everything, ***and*** we are responsible. The passage that expresses this best is found in Philippians 2:12-13: ***work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure.***

We are by nature rebellious against God and guilty on account of our rebellion. God does not owe any of us the grace that conquers our rebellion. If God leaves us in our rebellion, He is righteous and just to do so. He owes us nothing. We deserve punishment, not rescue. If you have come to faith, it is by the work of His grace. And if you endure and go on to maturity, it is also a work of His grace. **'This we will do, if God permits.'** And if He chooses not to permit it, He is not somehow preventing us from coming to Him or from growing, He is permitting us to remain as rebels. If we turn to God, that is the work of grace and we will go on to maturity. And we should tremble with gratitude. Gratitude that God did not leave us in our rebellion but graciously subdued us and brought us to Himself. Gratitude that we have received mercy and found grace. And that gratitude is evidenced in our going on to maturity.

And then the writer warns us about the consequences of not going on to maturity. *4 For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.* Now this is the difficult passage. And the question it raises is **'Are these genuine believers he is talking about?'** Can people who are really born again, justified and adopted into the family of God ultimately turn away and be lost? Because the writer here uses terminology that seems to indicate these people were at one time genuine believers. He says they were once enlightened which means that they knew at least some measure of truth. He says that they have experienced the good things of heaven and shared in the Holy Spirit and tasted the goodness of the word of God – and then they turn away. And so at first blush it seems to paint a picture of people who once believed, and then turned away.

But I don't think that is the case because of several reasons. The first one we have already looked at in Hebrews 3:14, where the author says, *For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.* It is in the past tense here and it says that you have become a partaker of Christ, or a genuine, born-again Christian, **IF** you persevere. Which is to say, your perseverance, or your enduring to the end is a **verification of your participation in Christ.** It does not say that your salvation is a reward for your perseverance, but rather your perseverance is proof that you belong to Him. So those who do not persevere, who do not endure to the end, never really belonged to Him in the first place. The person who drifts along in sin, who coasts and does not endure faithful to the end, was never in Christ.

The second reason for concluding that those in this passage are not believers is in verse 6 where it talks about those who have fallen away: *'for it is impossible...to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.* When someone turns away from God, perhaps having made even some kind of repentance, the writer says that in that turning away lies the impossibility of them returning again. We know, however, that nothing is impossible with God, and so those who are in this case must not be His. The impossibility is not with God but with them. They never really came to faith. Because he describes their condition as identical with those who originally crucified Jesus. *'... since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.* When someone throws in the towel so to speak and chooses the world over Christ; when we run after the fleeting pleasures of sin and the vanity of life; when we choose our own way instead of His – we say that all those other things are more precious than Christ and we hold Him up to public ridicule and shame, just like they did when He was on earth and hung there in full view of a mocking world. When we turn our backs on holiness and purity and righteousness and devotion to Christ which He brought about through His death on the cross, we give hearty assent to the sin and rebellion and darkness that nailed Him there in the first place – we crucify Him again.

Another reason for concluding that those the writer is talking about are not genuine believers is in the next three verses. Verses 7 and 8 read, *7 For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. 8 But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.* Here the issue is fruit. The rain is falling on two pieces of ground and one produces a good crop and the other produces thorns and thistles and is useless. And the end result is that the field is condemned and the produce is burned. The language means that the field is worthless, cursed, and destined for burning. **This is not the language God uses for the disciplining of His own children.** This cannot apply to real believers. The rain that falls on both grounds speaks to us of the water of the Word of God.

On some it falls and the ground grows good fruit – but on others it may fall, and just grows thorns and thistles. We are dust of the ground and something's going to grow – either fruit that is good or weeds to be burned. If your life is full of good fruit, characterized by holiness, righteousness, a hunger and thirst for God, it has the blessing of God, the Bible says. But if all that grows are thorns and thistles, there is only the 'fearful prospect of judgment and fury of fire.'

And finally in verse 9, the writer himself makes the distinction between those whose faith is genuine and those whose faith is not. *Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things--things that belong to salvation.* The writer seems to have a confident belief that his readers had an authentic faith and would persevere and not fall away. So the question that occurs to me, and I hope to you as well is, 'If he thinks that, why talk to them like this? Why all the dire warnings and talk about thorns and thistles and cursing and burning? Isn't this for those other guys who are obviously pagans? Or are we supposed to apply this to ourselves? I say yes for several reasons, not the least of which is the fact that the writer sent this letter to believers, not pagans.

But first of all we can be deceived, and we can deceive ourselves. We can deceive ourselves that a one-time profession of faith with no following proof is eternally effective. Some have made the issue of salvation a matter of a ticket transaction. You prayed a prayer, you signed a card, you raised your hand, you got your ticket. It is also true that we can actually have much truth and insight into the Bible and yet not be a true believer. *'For it is impossible to restore to repentance those who were once enlightened.* The writer is not suggesting any limitations on the power of God to restore anyone. The implication here is that they have heard the truth and rejected it and the very nature of this sin is opposed to real repentance. It is as Mathew Henry puts it, 'A total and willing renouncing of Christ'. The Scriptures record that Esau, who lost the birthright to his deceiving brother, could *'...find no place for repentance, even though he sought it with tears.'* But don't make the mistake of thinking that his repentance was genuine. God will never reject the genuine repentance of a humble and contrite heart. The problem was that Esau's heart had become hardened and he could not find that place of repentance even though there was genuine regret over missing it. But regret is not repentance.

The writer also says that the Holy Spirit can actually be at work in our lives, convicting, revealing truth, and yet we do not respond. *'...those who have experienced the good things of heaven and shared in the Holy Spirit.* We can actually have sat under the hearing of the Word of God, and confessed its truth, and yet be lost. *who have tasted the goodness of the word of God.* We can prophecy and cast out demons and do mighty works in Jesus' name, and then on judgment day hear the dreadful words of the Lord, *'Depart from Me you workers of iniquity, I never knew you.'* to those *'...who have tasted...the power of the age to come.'* And finally, I say we need to apply these warnings to our own hearts because the means God uses to keep us from falling away is to entice us with His precious and magnificent promises, and to sober us with His warnings. John Piper puts it this way: *'The point of the promises is to make our mouths water at the prospect of infinite happiness in God. And the point of the warnings is to make our hearts tremble at the prospect of falling under the wrath of God.'*

Having confronted his readers with the terrible end awaiting those whose faith proves not to be genuine, the writer goes on to say that he is confident that these believers are not the kind of ground that produces thorns and thistles because their lives were evidencing real faith which produces the genuine fruit of salvation. *9 Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things--things that belong to salvation.* He says that they are meant for better things, things that come with, or accompany, salvation. What things are those? What are the things that accompany salvation? What is the proof, as it were that you've not been fooling yourself? What are the things that should give us full assurance of hope that we are in the better things category and not the burned up category?

In this text the writer gives us three things: love, faith and endurance. First of all, a distinguishing mark of the truly converted is a genuine love for the saints. The apostle John in his first letter says, *We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.* 1 John 3:14 And the writer of Hebrews echos that here - *10 For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for His name in serving the saints, as you still do. .* To put it another way, *'Because you have cared for and ministered to your fellow saints, that is good evidence that you love God and are meant for better things.'*

But don't make the mistake of thinking that our work and our caring for the saints is just a humanitarian thing. Or that the end of our working and loving is focused on your fellow believers. The verse is clear – the focus of our work and the object of our love is God Himself. *the love that you have shown for His name*. The object and desire of our work and our love is Christ. If your focus on working and loving is on those around you, you may fall into the trap that working for God and loving God is equivalent to working for and loving people. And the worship and adoration of God degenerates into humanitarian efforts that only improve a temporal situation, and God ceases to be worshipped and begins to be used.

But the writer says here that God will remember and not forget our work and our love **toward Him**. That is, all our work and love is God-ward and God-centered. That is the real evidence that we are meant for better things – He is the ultimate reason why we love the saints and minister to their needs. It has its expression in how we deal with one another in love, but the emphasis is always on God. He does not say that He will remember our good works and love toward each other apart from anything else – but only as it relates to work and love for Christ. This takes our work and love out of the realm of merit. We don't merit salvation by working hard for God and doing good things for each other. It is out of love for Him that all our good works and love toward the saints will flow.

Another thing is the question that occurs when we read *'For God is not unjust.'* What does that mean? Does it mean that His justice or fairness is related to our working for Him and caring for others? Does it mean that we somehow earn His justice or fairness as wages? We work hard caring for the saints, and then God is obligated to repay us for the worth of our service? I think the Bible always answers 'No' to that. **What obligates the justice of God to remember and not forget our work and care is not the worth of our service, but the worth of His name.** His concern is not for our work, but His name, and His determination to uphold the worth and honor of His name. When we serve one another out of love for God, His fairness compels Him to remember our work and reward us for His name's sake.

Finally we should understand that endurance in the faith is key because the writer here goes on to say *11 And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, 12 so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.* There is an end in sight. Everything in this world is headed toward a final conclusion. And the difference between those whose assurance ends in fire and those whose assurance ends in glory has a lot to do with endurance, with perseverance, patience, the writer says, 'The writer says, 'Look at those whose lives of faith were a testimony to the grace and glory of God and do what they did. Imitate them. Persevere like they did.' When he says 'show the same earnestness' he is saying, ***'In the same way you demonstrated your love toward God for His sake, and it looked like loving and caring for the saints – now apply the same diligence and earnestness to the hope you have and imitate those faithful, patient and persevering saints who have gone before.'***

The writer is telling us this morning that there is a very real danger of a kind of false assurance that does not lead to eternal glory but to an eternal fire. It's a warning. Don't be fooled into thinking that regret equals repentance; don't be lulled into believing that doing Christian stuff is the same as being a Christian. Make sure your faith is not a weak and flimsy thing that wavers at every disappointment and every circumstance that seems to run contrary to the promises of God. Don't be dull and indifferent in the way you fight to keep your hope strong and real and vibrant, because it is through faith and perseverance that all that we hope for in God will come to pass. Let the hope of glory, the preciousness of being rescued from hell, the awesome forgiveness of our sins, the greatness of eternal life in God and the pleasures at His right hand work a deep and lasting assurance of salvation in your soul. Be filled with hope, because with the warning comes the promise that God Himself is working to make that happen for those who are the heirs of the promise. This is the means to full assurance, to a most certain confidence. It is our present hope of pardon and our future hope of glory.

Our gracious Father in heaven,

We thank You this morning for Your great and precious promises that entice us to remain faithful and fill us with anticipation of Your coming and cause our hearts to overflow with hope. Your word promises that with You there is unfailing love and an overflowing supply of salvation; Your word promises that You will not let any who are Yours fall away; Your word says that all who are Yours have reserved for them in heaven a priceless inheritance and that in Your mighty power You will protect those who trust in You until they receive it.

And thank You for the warnings that serve to make our hearts tremble at Your word, and cause us to take a clear-eyed look at our lives. Forgive us Lord for being content to remain as babies. Do not let us stay there. Let opposition and suffering have its effect in our lives to mature us and grow us into sons and daughters of God. Let the hard and sweet truth of Your word work in our hearts and minds until our living reflects the knowledge of God we profess. Do not let us deceive ourselves with a false sense of security, but cause us to press on to maturity. Let the water of Your word fall upon the ground of our hearts and bear a good crop. Incline our hearts to heaven and the soul-satisfying pleasures of knowing You. Let Your goodness and greatness wean us from the dangerous and foolish delights of this world, and engage our affections for Your glory and Your majesty, we pray in the precious and powerful name Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.