

Sermon 31: Hebrews 10:32-39: The Perseverance of the Saints

OUTLINE

Past encouragements
Present commitments

INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints is a misunderstood doctrine, but is central to the book of Hebrews. When many hear that Reformed folk believe that a true believer cannot lose his salvation but will persevere to the end, they miss what is being emphasized. Many wrongly conclude that we are promoting a 'once saved always saved' notion. That you pray the sinners prayer, get your ticket to heaven, now no matter how you live, even if you backslide and live in sin until you die, you will still go to heaven. No, that is not what we believe, the bible clearly promises judgement and death for those who sow to the flesh. No the perseverance of the saints has an important emphasis found in that word perseverance. We do believe that God saves you when He justifies you; your judgement day verdict is brought forward, there is no more judgement day wrath to be dealt out to your sins, past, present or future because Jesus has paid it all. Many wrongly conclude from this that this gives us a license to sin, and that holiness does not matter. Wrong. Imagine the two points of justification and glorification in your mind. The moment you are saved, and the moment you are resurrected. What lies between these two points? There is a path called sanctification. Now the bible clearly says that those whom God justifies He will glorify. Your justification is a guarantee of your glorification. But there is still this path of sanctification that must be walked. We would say as the bible says that this path is necessary, for without holiness no one will see the Lord. And this is where many get confused. What is the nature of this necessity? We are not saying that this path of sanctification is necessary as merit, as a way of earning the reward of glorification. Well, then why is perseverance necessary? Why is it that it is those who endure to the end, those who are holy will see the Lord? Doesn't this seeming conditionality; this necessity seem to imply that we can fall away; and not every saint will persevere? No! forgive the big word but this is where we talk about ordinative necessity. This simply means it must be so because God has appointed it to be so. God has ordained that the path between justification and glorification is a path of sanctification. Not for the purpose of buying glorification but as an appointed path along which the saved must walk. Why? God has purposes other than merely justifying and glorifying you. God also has purposes to sanctify you, to make you into the image of Christ and we know that this life of suffering and trial is a refining furnace where God on this side of eternity begins to conform us into the image of His Son. Many have spoken about how God is vindicated in the eyes of men and angels and demons, because those who are forgiven, are also transformed. God's holiness which seems to be in question when He seemingly covers over our sin in justification; making it appear as if He does not take His own holiness seriously. Now in our sanctification vindicates His holiness as He commands us to be Holy as He is; His Spirit, the Spirit of Holiness Himself given as an in-house resident to do the will of God in making us holy. God glorifies Himself through our sanctification as many see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven. Because sanctification; good works and perseverance are necessary do not automatically assume that they are meritorious, or that the true believer will not persevere. Now that verb persevere, or as our portion puts it 'endurance' v35 is key. Yes God has justified

you; Yes God has promised that all those He has justified will be glorified. But God has also appointed that every truly born again Christian walk this path of good works, of sanctification, or perseverance, or endurance. What we need to appreciate is that God has appointed the path of perseverance, a path of strenuous activity, of endurance as the path along which all believers are to walk. Many think that if the end is guaranteed that we don't have to make an effort—false. God has appointed to save you not without endurance but by it; not because it is meritorious, but because it is the appointed way in which sanctification takes place on this path between justification and glorification. For this reason some have controversially called good works, 'the path to salvation.' Not because it merits the salvation but because it is the appointed path the saved are called to walk for the purposes of sanctification. The book of Hebrews is all about encouraging you based on your justification and the finished work of Christ, to persevere until the end. Both the encouragements and the warning being the means by which we are enabled to persevere.

The central idea in 10:32-39 is the call to endure v36. This passage has been compared to a painkiller after surgery; or the parental embrace after loving discipline. We have had some exhortations in light of Christ's finished work, v19-25, the carrot; and we have had the warnings, v26-31, the stick. Well, now we have the encouragements and instructions that come after the discipline. The author seeks to encourage these hearers who are thinking of abandoning the faith due to persecution by reminding them of their past endurance; and then calling them to present endurance. Our two points then are past encouragements, v32-34; and present commitments, v35-39.

Past encouragements

V32-34, 'But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, ³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. ³⁴ For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.' It is a common biblical strategy to call us to remember. We need to be encouraged to remember because we so often lose sight of the truth. Our present difficulties can loom so large in our large that they induce a type of amnesia to God's goodness. They say hindsight has 20/20 vision and this is true as far as these believers go. The author obviously knows the situation of this church well, knowing their history and faithfulness in detail. He points them to their own past endurance in order to encourage them in the present. What is the value in this? To look back and see that God was faithful to His promises; that God had previously sustained them in their difficulties; that these pains are not new territory they haven't overcome in God's strength before; that this area of obedience is not alien; that God has led you through and brought you through difficulties like these before. The author is not asking them to remember how great they are but to recall a model of first love and willing suffering as an example for themselves now. It is the same for us. You may be feeling discouraged, uninspired, backslidden, fearful. Look back recall what a first love looks like; remember God's past dealings, He is the same yesterday and forever.

The author is likely alluding to a time about 15 years earlier when Claudius ordered all the Jews, including the Christian Jews out of Rome. Riots had broken out in the streets where the Jews were persecuting the Christians and this

brought the wrath of the Roman empire on them. This forced exile would have left their businesses vulnerable, their property up for grabs, their possessions they could not carry were likely plundered or had to be sold for less than their value. Those who had entertained hate used the authorities expulsion as an excuse to add insult to injury. We see that there was a loss of property, public shame, even imprisonments, probably accompanied with things like beatings. But he reminds them 'you endured a hard struggle.' That word struggle is the word from which we get our English words athlete or athletics. It was a time of great difficulty where they came to the end of themselves. He notes how they were exposed to reproach and affliction, harm to reputation and body. But he notes how even if some escaped this treatment, maybe due to being in a high position, they partnered with those who were suffering. In particular he talks about how these Christians ministered to those in prison. Prison conditions in these days were not like today. If you were put in prison, your family or friends had to provide your food, clothing, blankets etc. Here we see the church risking public shame in a shame and honour culture and happily ministering to these needy. He speaks not just about their actions but their compassion, deep feeling expressing itself in deeds. And this has always been the way with Christians. They have a great capacity for giving to those in need. Jesus notes this showing what separates the sheep and the goats in that parable, Matt. 25:35-36, 'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' How can Christians gladly wear shame, why would these believers risk the scandal of being associated with criminals and all the social implications that go with that? It is simple, our Savior was seen as a criminal; part of what it means to carry a cross is to carry an instrument of death applied to criminals; more than that we know ourselves to be criminals against God and yet He has not despised us but even paid the ransom for our release. In the early church this was a common practice where Christians would pay the ransom for the release of their fellow believers not abandoning them but reaching out to them in their shame and need.

But not only did they endure hardship; stand with one another through hardship; they even joyfully accepted the plundering of their property. Now it is very hard to joyfully accept the plundering of your property. I have been robbed 5 times living in NZ, and I have experienced a deep anger around robbery. It is a horrible crime of laziness. Someone works, giving hours of labor in value to an item, only for someone who refuses to work themselves to steal the fruit of another person's labor. It is like taking a part of someone's life away because of the time and effort and skill they dedicated to obtaining that thing. We put a fairly high value on our things because they are often handed down to us from loved ones, or obtained through effort; or may even be the direct fruit of something we have produced. Then yes there is our greed, and idolatry and the illegitimate way in which we overvalue things added into the mix. And then for someone to rob you. How can you joyfully accept that? The author tells us how, 'since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.' In becoming a believer we have learnt the truth about the things of this life and the next. That here moth and rust destroy, naked we came into this life and naked we will return, that there is nothing here that is of eternal value or duration. But more than that we have an inheritance as the children of God; we have the prospect of a better creation filled with treasures that are imperishable, which cannot be stolen. What we are seeing here is how the truth of our future grasped by faith is able to put out the fires of anger and desire towards the loss of present things. These enables a genuine joy because the Spirit of glory rests upon us; because

we are partakers in His sufferings; because these sufferings are not worthy to be compared to the glories yet to be revealed in us when He returns; because of the promise that we will receive a hundredfold in return what we have lost in following Christ. The next chapter is going to develop this idea of how faith in what we know is ours in the end fuels our present perseverance, for now let me point you to 11:8-10, 'By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.'

Now you may not be facing the plundering of your property, but your world may be rocked anyway. Maybe the value of your property has taken a down turn messing up your retirement plans. Maybe your health has taken a turn and you are no longer facing a care free future but one of uncertainty. No matter what your difficulty is this future oriented faith, is fuel for endurance.

Present commitments

V35-39, 'Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.' Your past faith looked to the future and endured; so again let your present faith look to the future and endure. You can feel the author gearing up for what we know is coming in the next chapter. Chapter 11 is all about faith, a faith in our future reward acting as fuel for our present endurance. But before he pulls out all the stops and lists example after example in the OT finally coming to our greatest example in Christ, he calls us to endure/persevere by faith. There are several things that we can say about our endurance/perseverance from these verses.

Firstly, our endurance is based on our confidence in Christ not ourselves. The author has been demonstrating how much better Christ is than the OT system and how He has opened up our way back to God so that by His finished work we can confidently come into His presence. Don't throw this confidence away, it is not misplaced, it is in Christ not yourself.

Secondly, our endurance ends in great reward. The word reward can indicate something merited, but this is not the meaning here. We are called to run as for first prize but our race is different to any sport. Christ has run our race, won the prize, given it to us, and now calls us to run the race knowing the victory is secure not in order to try and earn the victory. Trust in Christ does not lie; God will deliver on His promises, there is a salvation won by Christ at the end of this race.

Thirdly, we see in v36 the necessity of endurance. You must persevere and you have everything you need to incentivize and strengthen you to do so. The ordinary way in which God saves His people is by justifying them, and then setting them on the path of sanctification, where they persevere to the end by faith, and at the end of the road of sanctification is glorification. Any notion of

getting saved and not having to live a life of holiness is put to death. All those who are truly born again, will go on to live out a life of holiness, and in the face of suffering endurance, as part of the outworking of a true work of grace. I want to stress again that this endurance is not meritorious, but instrumental. God does not save us by it, but to it. He wills that our salvation should include a life of clinging to Him in faith where we put His value on display through choosing Him and what He has promised us in Christ even over our own lives.

Fourthly, notice that the author now quotes the OT to reinforce these ideas. Firstly he quotes a very short section from Isaiah 26:20, 'Yet a little while.' This section in Isaiah has already been quoted in 10:26. Isaiah 26 is a call for Judah to trust in God despite their being the threat of invasion, a call to live by faith. But notice how these words put our own suffering into perspective. We only suffer and have to endure for a little while. The enemy seems to prosper for a little while. Though it might feel long, in the greater plan of God this is just a little while. Paul applies this way of thinking as well. Rom. 8:18, 'For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.' 2 Cor. 4:17, 'For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.'

Fifthly, and the next OT quote he uses to encourage us to live by faith is Hab. 2:3-4. Now as you compare these two sections you will see that our author has interpreted the coming judgement in light of the coming of Christ, translating 'it' the coming judgement as the coming one, namely Christ. The NT quotes Hab. 2:4 three times, Rom. 1:17 and Gal. 3:11 where in the foreground of those quotes is faith as justifying faith. In the foreground of the usage here, we see not justifying faith but persevering faith. For the same faith that justifies is the faith by which we persevere. The OT clearly teaches that the righteous one (one justified by faith to pursue righteousness) is one who lives and continues to pursue righteousness by a persevering faith. The person who is saved by faith also lives and perseveres by faith. The original context of Habakkuk is helpful here. Habakkuk was a prophet who complained to the Lord about the wickedness of Israel, complaining that God did not seem to be following through only being holy and punishing sin. God came to Him in a vision and told the prophet that He would punish Israel by sending sinful Babylon to invade them. The prophet was not satisfied thinking that this seemed overkill that a more wicked nation would be used to punish a less sinful nation. God gave Him another vision overwhelming his complaints with a reminder of His holy glory and the reality of justice for all sin. Habakkuk learns in these verses that during this time when God is moving in mysterious way, the righteous live by faith awaiting God to finally judge all evil while being patient and faithful, even while the wicked seem to prosper. The book ends with a powerful statement about the faith the righteous live by as they trust in God's goodness awaiting His plans, 3:17-19, 'Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold

and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.' It is this kind of faith that we are being called to apply, a faith full of confidence in God and confident in the happy ending we have been promised and will come to pass because of the work of Christ.

You will notice that the author has paraphrased the last part of Hab. 2:4 applying those statements that spoke about the proud that God will judge to those who

shrink back from following Christ abandoning faith and forsaking Christ becoming the objects of God's judgement.

You will notice that our section ends on a positive note despite the strong warning from Hab. 2:4, v39, 'But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.' The author includes himself along with these tested saints when he says 'we'. Here like in 6:9-12, we see that despite strong and sobering warnings the author is confident that these believers have true faith and will persevere. I know that some tremble when they hear these warnings; especially those who lack assurance of salvation or may have recently sinned can have their confidence shaken. But we must see what the author is saying. Yes we will face trials, yes our path can be difficult and our enemies strong, but our faith overcomes the world. 1 John 5:4, 'For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.' Your path may not be pain free but you believe in a great God; in a victorious Savior; in a certain hope and are enabled by the Spirit to see and cling to Christ. Yes there is effort, yes we must endure pain and persevere when discouraged, but we run knowing that the prize is ours and waiting for us.