

Don't shrink back - persevere!

Kingham 24/5/2009

Readings: Hebrews 10:19-39

Introduction to the reading

Please open your pew Bible to page and let me give you a brief overview of our Hebrews passage before it's read.

Remember that this letter was written to Christians who had come from a Jewish background but had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

They had accepted that gospel, they'd repented of their sins, and were trusting in Jesus' death on the cross, in their place, as the reason why God would forgive them.

I hope that is true for everyone of us here today as well.

If it's not, please speak to me or someone, and please will you do it soon – this is important.

These Jewish Christians had done that, but were being sorely tempted to chuck it all in and go back to Judaism.

In the middle section of the letter which Steve concluded last week, the writer shows how Jesus alone died for the forgiveness of all who trust him.

So our reading opens with the word 'therefore' and then offers us three challenges, which anyone who professes to believe the Christian Faith should respond to it.

A challenge to draw near to God in prayer; a challenge to hold unwaveringly to the Christian hope we profess; and a challenge to spur one another on to persevere as Christians, right to the very end.

He then points out in vv26-31 the frightening prospect for any believers who then reject Christ.

And finishes from v32 by encouraging us not to shrink back, but to persevere.

So I've titled today's section, 'Don't shrink back - persevere!'

Introduction

So what about old Sir Ranulph Fiennes, eh!

Getting to the top of Everest at 65!

What's really blown me away, though, is that it was his third attempt – and his first one failed when he had a heart attack on the way up!

Now to me there's something decidedly strange about anyone who risks life & limb by climbing a mountain 'just because it's there'.

But to try again after you've had a heart attack?

And when you fail a second time, to try once more?

What amazing endurance and perseverance!

Now if you're like me, you're probably of the view that you couldn't persevere like that.

You'd just give up as soon as the going got tough; the muscle ache got severe; the frostbite set in.

If so, may I suggest that you don't join the SAS.

Or take up mountain climbing; or marathon running.

And don't follow Jesus as a Christian.

Not if you can't persevere.

I say that because the New Testament compares living the Christian life to being a soldier or an athlete?

Not a sprinter, but in an endurance event like the marathon.

Just by way of one example, as the apostle Paul approaches execution for a life of faithfully preaching the gospel, he writes this to some friends.

2 Timothy 4:7 "I've fought the good fight, I've finished the race, I've kept the faith."

Yes!

Will you be able to say that?

"I've fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith"?

Will Jesus meet you with those words "Well done, good and faithful servant"?

Don't shrink back – persevere!

So let's look at how we can persevere.

Let's see how we can "press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called [us] heavenwards in Christ Jesus", as Paul puts it in Philippians 3:14.

Verses 26-31 are very important as a reason to persevere – they are a stern warning not to turn my back on Jesus.

But I covered that on February 15th from chapters 5 & 6 and you can read the notes on our web site.

So I want to spend most of our time on the first 6 verses, because they represent practical directions for you and me on how to keep going as a Christian.

Things that you can put into place in your life this week, if you haven't already or have slipped a bit.

Let us draw near to God

The first thing I will need is the confidence to draw near to God, that comes from understanding the gospel.

Look with me at v19: "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body..."

And he goes on to say in v22, 'let's draw near to God'.

Very Jewish kind of language, but he was writing to Jews!

Before Jesus' death, God's presence was focussed in a little room in the centre of the temple in Jerusalem.

Only the High Priest could go in; only once a year; and even then only after lots of preparation and cleansing.

The way to that room was barred by a 40 foot high curtain!

We were in a hotel recently ½ inch thick, triple-lined curtains.

The temple curtain was nearer 14 inches thick!

That symbolised that the way to God was blocked.

People were terrified of that 'Most Holy Place'.

But when Jesus died on the cross, half a mile down the road from the temple, that curtain tore in two.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all record that, 14 inches thick and 40 feet high, it tore from top to bottom!

God did what no human being could possibly have done; he tore that curtain as Jesus' body was being torn.

God did what no human being could possibly have done; he opened the way for sinners to be his friends.

To approach him confidently, without fear.

Now focus with me on that 6th word in v19 – 'confidence'.

The Greek word translated here means 'an attitude of openness that stems from freedom and lack of fear'.

'An openness that stems from freedom and lack of fear'.

Does that describe your relationship with God?

I like people who are open and able to admit their weaknesses, their mistakes and the longings of their heart.

Well when you realise that Jesus died for you, that gives you the most extraordinary confidence – 'freedom and lack of fear' – to approach your Heavenly Father in prayer.

Not because you're special or holy or anything else.

Simply because Jesus has cleared the way, ripped open the curtain.

'Confidence' could be translated 'courage' or 'boldness'.

If you know Jesus died on the cross for your forgiveness, then you don't need to fear when you come to God in prayer.

Think of the welcome home that the prodigal son got from his Father when he repented and came back!

That was Jesus' way of telling us how thrilled our Heavenly Father is when we come back to him.

Or think of Romans 5v8: "God demonstrates his own love for us" – that means for you, he demonstrates his love for you! – "in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

So how are you going to put that into practice this week?

By confidently approaching your Heavenly Father in prayer.

Like a child who is absolutely certain his or her daddy loves them and loves being with them.

So pray openly, telling him everything in your heart and on your mind.

And don't just pray at set times, approach him confidently in prayer all through your day.

As you work, as you relax, as you drive, as you walk.

Jesus paid with his life that you and I might confidently approach our Heavenly Father in prayer.

The very least we can do is take advantage of the open curtain Jesus died to give us!

We need to if we're going to keep going as Christians.

Let us hold unswervingly

The second thing we can do to help ourselves persevere as Christians is in verse 23:

"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful."

Spanish drivers swerve all over the road, often at speed!

It's not a good way to get from A to B, swerving in and out of the lane that you should be in.

And it's not a good way to persevere as a Christian.

Some Christians live like the Spaniards drive, they don't stick to the lane, the gospel as God has revealed it to us in the Bible, but lurch from one new idea and teaching to another.

There's always something more exciting than the truths of Scripture.

Or they say the Holy Spirit is guiding us into deeper truths than the Bible writers knew or understood.

Well, the apostle Paul warned us that this would always be a problem in the church in 2 Timothy 4:3:

"the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear."

In other words, they will swerve all over the place!

Let's not do that; let's be people who hold unswervingly to the truths of God's word we profess.

Why?

v23, because "he who promised is faithful."

God has always kept his promises in the past, so you can be confident he will keep his promises in the future.

And where do I find his promises that I can trust?

In the Bible!

There is a growing network of Christians in the Church of England called 'The Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans'.

It includes conservatives, Anglo-catholics and Charismatics.

It started in Jerusalem at the GAFCON conference last year.

It's trying to call some swerving Christians back to the confessions of faith on which the church was formed.

The word 'confess' literally means 'to say the same things'.

So to be a confessing Christian means to say the same thing as God says in Scripture.

And Hebrews says that you and I need to be doing that all the time, if we don't want to swerve off course in our faith.

"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess".

Let us spur one another on

The final challenge to help us persevere is in vv 24f.

Let's read it aloud together, because it's all about us.

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds.

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

There's a pressing need for every Christian to meet regularly with other believers.

Are you doing that?

It seems some were giving up regularly attending church, and that was bad news, Hebrews says.

Those of you who read our lent book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, will have seen just how vital it is for every Christian to regularly meet with others.

In fact, one usually accurate telltale sign of a Christian growing cold in their faith is when their attendance at church services and Bible studies becomes irregular.

Are you at church on Sunday and at a Bible study in the week, unless there is a very good reason not to be?

Do you make it the priority the Bible says it should be?

Now notice two things.

Firstly, this challenge is mutual – it's not the Vicar's job, we're to spur one another on and encourage one another.

It is the express responsibility of every single Christian, from the newest convert to the oldest in the tooth.

Secondly it's the reason why Christians should meet together.

To spur one another on and encourage one another.

We don't meet together as Christians to worship; or to listen to a sermon; or to discuss a Bible passage.

Hopefully all of those will be part of what we do and help us achieve our goal.

But our goal, why we meet together, is to “spur one another on to love and good deeds” and to “encourage one another” to persevere as Christians.

Have you seen that before?

Why we gather together on Sundays and mid week?

When you see that, a lot changes.

I'm no longer concerned about whether I like the music or the building or the seating.

Or about the leader's style and irritating habits.

And I'm no longer judging the worship or the teaching.

So what am I doing?

I'm looking for how God wants to use other Christians to spur me on to love and good deeds and to encourage me.

And I'm looking for how I can spur on and encourage others.

The word translated ‘spur on’ is from the word to sharpen.

Proverbs 27:17 says “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”

We should be sharpening one another so that we are more effective tools in our master's hands.

Tools to love and do the good deeds that comes from love.

And if you're anything like me, you will need a lot of spurring and encouraging to love like Jesus loves.

Because it doesn't come naturally!

Nor does persevering in following him!

So let me ask you this.

Before you come to church on Sunday or Bible study in the week, do you “consider how” you might do those things?

Do you pray for God's help to spur on and be spurred on?

To encourage and be encouraged?

Just reading through the passage being studied or preached on would be a good start - the topic for each Sunday is on the rotas, and they are on the web or you could ask to be given a copy.

Look, I don't know all the answers about how each of us might better spur one another on to love and good deeds on Sunday and at weekday Bible study.

So pray about it, reflect on it, talk to one another about it.

But I do know this, straight from this passage of the Bible.

Meeting together with the express purpose of spurring on and encouraging one another is as vital to our perseverance as Christians as praying and holding unswervingly to the truths of the Bible.

All are God's ways of letting iron sharpen iron; of fanning into flame the Holy Spirit's work in our lives; of keeping us safe in our Saviour's hands right to the end.

Conclusion

An elderly clergyman from Sydney who has had a profound influence on my life once said this.

‘It's very hard to keeping going as a Christian, and even more so in full-time gospel ministry. I've often not wanted to get out of bed in the morning because it was so hard. When that happened, I would sit myself down on the end of the bed and have a chat with myself.

“Chappo”, I would say, “are you in receipt of any new information that would make you doubt that Jesus really did rise from the dead?”

“Nope!”

“Remember when you did all that work on whether the Bible is a reliable document?”

“Yup.”

“Any reason to doubt your original conclusions?”

“Nope!”

“Well then, get up, get dressed and get on with following Christ like you promised.

You've no choice!”