

Never Give Up: An Introduction to the Book of Hebrews

a sermon in the series
Hebrews: An Epistle of Encouragement

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From the many true and epic stories about the life of Winston Churchill comes the report of a singular commencement address that he made at a British university. After enduring a lengthy introduction, Churchill reportedly rose from his seat, strode to the podium and stared fixedly upon his audience of new graduates and pronounced to them solemnly, "Never give up." He turned around, walked back to his chair, and sat back down. Stunned students momentarily didn't know what to do. Churchill once again arose with perfect timing, strode to the podium and again announced, "Never give up." He turned around, and sat down the second time. The students didn't know what to do, and didn't do anything for fear they might do the wrong thing. Again the speaker returned to the podium and he said, "Never give up." Churchill did this for a total of five times. At last--- thinking he had exhausted his audience and driven his point home, he sat down, gave up, and did not return to the podium.

Has the church forgotten that it has received the same message from the Divine? God has promised never to give up on you. Both the Old and New Testaments remind us God never, never, never gives up on us. Well, the book of Hebrews is written to remind us that we are never to give up either. The book of Hebrews is a skillfully written message, not an unsympathetic "hang in there" to some people who were going through some difficult times. How quick we are to offer uncaring advice. If you, your spouse or your child succumbs to an addiction such as, drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, is the solution just to hang in there? No! When the company tells you that your job is going to be phased out or the company is going somewhere else, do you just hang in there? Absolutely not! There is no real encouragement in the philosophy, "just hang in there."

Hebrews is a marvelously executed message offering great hope and a means not just to hang in there, but a means to overcome. These thirteen chapters we are about to embark upon are a message of encouragement and how to persevere. I have probably read Hebrews fifty or sixty times and memorized a great portion of it. I have come away from this book believing that the reason why it was written was to encourage us to keep on . . . to never give up. The apostle who writes this great epistle lays out before us the theme of encouragement and perseverance in a very unusual way. I say unusual in comparison to the way in which we encourage others. He does it by teaching us the superiority of Christ. It is in the superiority of Christ that we have the encouragement of hope and the motivation to never give up.

Today, I am going to introduce the book to you and discuss its major theme. We are going to look at three things today in this introductory message. These three things must serve as a lens

through which we view the book. These were the three major objectives of the writer of Hebrews. First, it was written to encourage persecuted believers. Secondly, it was written to warn readers of the consequences of not persevering. Thirdly, it was written to teach us the superiority of Christ, which both encourages and warns us. So we must constantly remember these three objectives for these next several weeks and months as we go through this book. We could say the theme of this epistle is to share the superiority of Christ to encourage and to warn.

Now the book of Hebrews was written probably somewhere in the middle '60s AD. It was written to a church, or churches, of Jewish believers who were undergoing persecution. Traditionally, it has been attributed in its authorship to the apostle Paul. However, that has been debated throughout all the centuries of Christendom. In my study, I have tried to determine who the author of this book was. I refer you to John Owens who wrote a seven-volume commentary on Hebrews. He spends many chapters and pages proving the traditional idea that the apostle Paul is indeed the author of the book of Hebrews. Personally, I lean in this direction. I believe Paul in all probability wrote the book of Hebrews. However, I did find one verse in the second chapter that did give me some questions about Pauline authorship. But, dear friends, the human authorship has little merit here. The truth is, its authorship is Divine. God wrote the book of Hebrews, and He wrote it to you. It is His word to say to you, never give up.

In Hebrews chapter twelve and verse three, we see the author state the fact that these Jewish believers had undergone persecution. Their reputations had been maligned for identifying with the Lord Jesus. The legal authorities had confiscated some of their homes and properties. Many, because they believed in Jesus, had lost their employment. Some had even been imprisoned. At the time of the letter's writing nobody had yet died for Christ. Because of the persecution, many were wondering why this was happening. This is a normal question when we go through adversity. It is a normal human reaction. It is not unusual or necessarily evil to have amazement when you and I have troubles. These Christians were discouraged to say the least. No doubt many were questioning what God was doing, and some were so disheartened that they wondered had they made the right choice when they chose to follow Christ.

Hebrews 12:3, 4 says, "For consider Him that endured such contradiction of sinners against Himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin." There is no doubt that the writer is writing to a group who was persecuted, and he is writing to encourage them to not give up--- that there is hope.

Now friends, it is imperative that we understand as we go through our own adversities that God is having His way with us. Some suggest that when the Bible deals with suffering it is dealing with persecution only. That is not true. It is not true at all. Job was not persecuted. He suffered physically, financially, emotionally, but he was suffering for the cause of God. Paul received persecution, but he also suffered for the cause of Christ in other ways. He said he knew what it was like to be cold and naked and hungry and destitute. Paul suffered many physical ailments, and all of these things he considered to be sufferings for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, dear Christian friend, what you need today if you suffer, is a word of encouragement. You need to know that in the midst of your difficulties there is hope. The writer of Hebrews writes these thirteen chapters to encourage his audience with hope. We are living in an unusual time right now in American history. Never have things gone as they have now gone in a presidential election. Our society has been thrown into a panic and turmoil. But for the Christian (although you may be anguishing over what you may be seeing now) there is no reason to be discouraged or to be dismayed. We need not be discouraged because we understand that there is a sovereign God who is in control. He is working out His will according to His predetermined plan, and it will be accomplished as God sees fit. It may not be the salvation of the United States of America that He has planned. It may be the demise of this country. Have you not considered that at this precise time in American history more innocent children have been slaughtered than in all of the concentration camps of Hitler's Germany? Do you realize that God's judgment on the people of Israel was for the same crimes and sins that this nation has committed, especially in our lifetime? Do you not realize that the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah are now our sins? It might very well be that what you and I are seeing unfold before our very eyes is another step to the final deterioration and destruction of the land that we love. But I have encouraging news today. The book of Hebrews tells me Jesus Christ is superior.

Let me share with you one of the ways in which God intends for us to be encouraged. The writer encourages the readers through the superiority of Christ, but he also exhorts believers to encourage one another. In the third chapter and verse thirteen of Hebrews the writer says, "But exhort one another daily, while it is called Today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." The word exhort can be interpreted encourage. In other words Paul is saying, "But encourage one another daily, while it is called Today." In the chapter ten verse twenty-five he commands his readers, "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting (again there is that same word which means encouraging) one another: and so much the more, as you see the day approaching." Paul has given us thirteen chapters to encourage us, and we will see that in the weeks to come. At the same time he admonishes us to encourage one another. The underpinning purpose of a local church is to provide a means of encouraging, exhorting, motivating, pushing, and loving one another along in the hope of Jesus Christ.

Last Sunday evening was one of those services that we are going to remember for a long time. It will be remembered for a long time simply because these truths were put into action. As we allowed the Holy Spirit to lead us, even though some of us might have been a little nervous about standing up and sharing our heart, we see the evidence that the Spirit of God was in it. We were encouraged . . . all of us. Not only the ones who said, "I have a need," but even we who ministered unto them found strength and encouragement that God's system truly works. The church works. In a day of disillusionment there is little to no faith in any institution. From government to the church, people are disillusioned, disenfranchised with established organizations. But when a church will follow the instructions of the Word of God and be filled with the Holy Spirit, it will work. It will be a bastion of hope in a hopeless culture. This ought to be the place that you run to when you are discouraged. This ought to be the place you quickly turn to when you need hope.

I am not talking about only when we gather. I am also talking about when we are not gathered, but scattered. There ought to be open lines of communication one with another, encouraging, exhorting, and admonishing one another. The church works. It is God's means of encouragement as is the written Word of God.

Now let's move to our second point. The second predominant reason why the word of Hebrews was written was to warn believers of the consequences of not persevering. Repeatedly throughout the book of Hebrews we have this warning to persevere.

Now this second reason for writing the book of Hebrews may seem to be contradictory to the very first reason, which was to encourage. It is so negative. It sounds so frightening. There have been some who have maintained that the book of Hebrews should have not been included in the canon of Scripture because of these warnings. But the very argument against it is the very reason for it. Warnings provide encouragement.

Let us look at some of the warnings. Hebrews chapter two and verse three, "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard [him]; God also bearing [them] witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?" Paul is addressing a situation that has occurred among these local Christians. Because of the persecution that had taken place, several of the members had defected from the church and gone back into Judaism. You and I know so little about persecution. We really have no idea of what persecution is. But today there are many people who are being persecuted for their faith. There are people this morning that may not see the sun set, because they may have to pour out their blood for Jesus. Some are imprisoned, and some in some excruciating pain.

Something happens to a church when it has not been persecuted and has practiced "Christianity" in comfort. Many converts come into its midst who have never been genuinely converted. The church becomes lax. When persecution rears itself against such a church, it is shaken. Often those who have simply professed a faith in Christ, but have a heart devoid of Christ, defect. They no longer stay true to their profession of faith and they drop out. Instead of suffering they say, "No, I am not going to keep my profession" or, "I will just go private with it. I can keep it in my heart, but I will deny Christ publicly to keep myself from enduring suffering." That is exactly what was taking place among the Hebrew Christians. God was shaking these Jewish churches and what was being sifted was many people who had an empty profession of faith.

Paul was asking how they could escape if they neglected this great salvation, which our Lord Jesus instituted. He wisely uses the Old Testament Scriptures as a means of argument. In effect he argues, "If those who received the word of angels and the Law of Moses did not escape judgment when they defected in unbelief, how will you escape? We have a greater gospel, a greater word, a superior Christ to whom we owe allegiance. If a lesser message brought by angels and men brought judgment to those who did not adhere to it, how much more will you be judged if you don't stay true?"

In Hebrews chapter three verse fourteen Paul says, "For we are made partakers of Christ." As a Baptist I am not scared of the next word, "if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end." We are going to have lengthy discussions about this verse and others like it, because throughout the book of Hebrews this theme is repeated. We will have to deal with it often. Therefore, we will only touch upon it here and with a very light touch. Is it possible for a Christian to lose their salvation? The conclusion of the writer of Hebrews is an emphatic no. It cannot happen. This was one of the reasons he wrote the book to give true assurance to true believers. Yet, many try to use some of the writings of this book to prove that a Christian can lose their salvation. It is just not a plausible argument. In fact, it is full of holes. You can raise it up to the light and see holes all through it.

Paul was establishing the truth that you are made a partaker of Christ if you persevere; therefore, those who persevere were truly partakers of Jesus. This is not complicated. Only those who persevere are the ones who truly have been partakers of Jesus Christ.

Paul says in Hebrews chapter four and verse one, "Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise be left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem coming short of it." Again it seems almost a contradiction, a great anomaly that he would say on one hand that he wanted to encourage them, and on the other hand he wanted them to be fearful of falling. But again there is a comfort from a type of fear that we call a godly fear. More about this later.

Hebrews chapter ten and verse thirty-five again warns believers of the consequences of not persevering. It reads, "Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise." He encourages them to never give up. Friends, there is a mark of distinction that attends the Christian. It is the characteristic of an undying tenacity, stick-to-itiveness no matter how discouraging times are. Notice I didn't say they do not get discouraged, because I would be unscriptural. Christians do get discouraged. Don't sit there pompously thinking that you never get discouraged, you never get anxious, that you never experience an unsettledness of heart and soul. You do. We all do! But what sets us apart as different is that though we may lose our tempers, we may go hungry, we may be scolded by God, we may sometimes be egotistical, we sometimes are testy or impatient, we sometimes make mistakes, we sometimes are discouraged, we still doggedly blunder our way towards Heaven. We never give up. We may fail, but we don't fall. We may stumble, but we don't stop. That is what the writer of Hebrews is saying. He is saying I want you to be so afraid of defecting from the faith that you will not defect from the faith. Now how can those who are eternally secure be so warned if they cannot lose their salvation? How could the apostle say I want you to be afraid of losing your salvation, if you cannot lose your salvation? What good can come from such a negative? Well, let me share with you that a negative can have great positive results. Tell your children that if they disobey the consequences will be very negative and see what kind of positive results you will get. Ladies and gentlemen, the words of the warnings that we find throughout the book of Hebrews, is God warning us. He realizes those who have the nature of Jesus Christ have a dread or fear of one thing. It is called unrighteousness. If you are a Christian you will never, until you get to Heaven, live without fear. You will

always be haunted with a fear that you can't shake, a fear you will not overcome, and a fear you will never out grow. It is the fear of unrighteousness, of sin, of displeasing your Lord. It stays with you because it is a part of that supernatural nature that has been born into you by the Holy Spirit.

Paul realized this is a fear native to the Christian soul and spirit. He appealed to it time and time again knowing that the fear of sin will motivate an enduring spirit. It will inspire one to not defect. Such a godly fear ensures the believer will keep their profession, and to not give up in the face of suffering for Christ. John Wesley said it this way, "Give me ten men who love God, and fear sin and I'll change the world." Why did he add the fear of sin to the words love God? He understood something . . . that men who fear sin, will avoid sin. There are many people today, and so sadly, who are devoid of this kind of godly fear. One of the most besetting theological nightmares that is occurring in American Christianity is the producing of empty professions of faith. It is a concept that one can profess faith in Christ and be saved and not have to follow the Lord in obedience. It suggests that grace somehow precludes a holy life. If you have professed faith in Christ, and you say to others that you are a Christian, we are told we have no right to question that. We are told we have no right to examine that. The common notion among so many churches is that it does not matter how you live after your profession of faith. You can live like the devil and you are still going to Heaven. This is producing the destruction of American Christianity. You and I are reaping the results of several generations of such a teaching. It's a false gospel message giving a false hope. It is this lie that some proclamation from your lips or some experience that does not change your life and your heart will save you, that is literally leading to the deterioration of the American church.

The truth the book of Hebrews proclaims is much different from what is now crippling the church. Those who are of Christ persevere, and they persevere in good works, and they persevere in their faith. The writer of Hebrews does not imply you never get discouraged. It doesn't mean sometimes you question your own faith in God. It means you don't give up!

There is a fundamental difference. The difference between the message of the book of Hebrews and much of American Christianity is the difference between the Spirit and the flesh. So many of today's professions of faith are devoid of the new birth. There is lacking a fear of failing God, a fear of what sin might do to the glorious, holy name of Jesus.

What Paul is doing is appealing to a fear that he knows is in real Christians but isn't in those who are not Christians. I am eternally secure, but that eternal security does not remove the fear that I have of failing God. If you are saved, it ought to be in you. One night a young man took a short cut, late at night through a cemetery. They had dug a grave and had not filled it up yet. He fell in. He clawed and screamed, kicked, and tried to climb his way out of it. He couldn't so, he decided he would wait until morning. He crawled up in one corner of the dark grave and went to sleep. Well, a second fellow happened to take the same short cut through the cemetery, and he too fell into the same grave. He too began to claw and kick and try to climb his way out until he heard a voice say, "You are never going to get out of here." That was all it took, he got out of there. Sometimes God motivates us by fierce warnings. To those who are saved, it is often all they need

to turn them out of their slumber, out of their apathy, out of their stage of disobedience and rebellion. So we have warning after warning, not to prove that you can lose your salvation, but to strengthen those who are saved.

Now how does He do this? This leads us to the third and final theme of the book of Hebrews, the superiority of Christ. The book of Hebrews is a book that simply magnifies Jesus. This is how the writer both encourages and warns us. He speaks of Christ as the superior revelation. The book begins in this manner in the very first verse. We will be looking at this next week. "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high."

What a passage! He begins the book by stating the superiority of Christ. Christ is the best revelation of God we have. "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets." Later in chapter two the text will tell us God even spoke by angels. How spectacular is that? Even heavenly creatures had spoken to the fathers in time past. But one descended from glory that was not angelic but divine. Christ Jesus became a human being. He spoke, and when he spoke it was God speaking. Paul wanted to encourage his readers, and it should encourage you today. His message is that you have the best message going ... CNN has nothing on God. The best news is Jesus. If you have Christ, you have hope today. But, if you do not listen to Jesus, watch out!

The second thing he says about Christ and His superiority is that He is superior to Moses. In Hebrews 3:1 he says, "Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus; who was faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house. For this man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honour than the house."

Paul says to the Jews, you honor Moses. You think Moses is wonderful and was. He was a good man, faithful to the God who called him. But Moses is only a part of the house. He is just part of the fixtures. He is just a two-by-four in this structure. Jesus is the builder, and therefore He is superior to Moses. Oh, dear saint, it is no different for you. You have somebody who is building something out of your life, so don't be discouraged today. Whether illness, persecution, financial loss, or a loss of a loved one has occurred in your life, there is a master constructor who is building out of your life something eternal. Be encouraged ... never give up. But beware if you don't let the master builder use you as he intended, beware.

The third thing he says about Christ is He is a superior priest.

And inasmuch as not without an oath he was made priest: (For those priests were made without an oath; but this with an oath by him that said unto him, The Lord sware and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec) (Hebrews 7:20).

Christ is superior for He is part of a superior priesthood. "By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament. And they truly were many priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death." The old Levitical priests could not carry on with their priesthood because they died. But this man Jesus, because he continueth forever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. You only need one priest when the priest never dies.

You don't have to give up today. You may feel like it. But you don't have to give up because Jesus is your High Priest. Your High Priest is interceding for you. However, if you work against the High Priest of your faith, you have no other person to mediate for you. Thus the letter to the Hebrews says to us, beware.

Lastly, the apostle says about Jesus (he says many things about the Lord in this book. We are just highlighting a few today) is that He is a superior sacrifice. In Hebrews chapter nine verse twenty-three, Christ is a superior sacrifice. "It was therefore necessary that the patterns of things in the heavens should be purified with these; but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these." He is talking about the Old Testament tabernacle, and all of the furniture and instruments of the tabernacle purified by the blood of the animals. He goes on to say in verse twenty-three through twenty-six, "But the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these, for Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but in to heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us: nor yet that He should offer Himself often, as the High Priest entereth into the holy place every year with blood of others; for then must He often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath He appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself."

Dear friend, Jesus' sacrificial death on Calvary is sufficient for the forgiveness of all of your sins past, present, and future. So much so that He does not need to come back and die for the sin you will commit tomorrow. It is sufficient for it, as it was for yesterday's sin. Therefore, there is no other sacrifice. And if there is no other sacrifice then what do you have for your sins if you reject Christ? What do you have to cover and cleanse you from sin? You have nothing since there is no other sacrifice. Again the message of the book of Hebrews to you is, beware if you refuse the superior sacrifice of Christ.

I believe the whole book of Hebrews will strengthen this church immensely. It will take your life on a new course. It will strengthen your resolve to follow the Lord no matter what happens. Often when adversity comes we say, "Is this worth it? Is the price that I have to pay in order to follow Jesus, is it worth it?" I want to remind you that He, who is superior to all things, has not had the final word yet.

A little boy was playing third base in fourth grade baseball. The team was losing 25 to 0. The little boy was chattering at third base, "Come on guys. Come on batter-batter swing." He was really into the game as if they were winning twenty-five to nothing. His father yells out to him from the dugouts,

“Son, aren’t you discouraged?”

“No, Dad, I am not.”

“But it’s 25 to 0, how can you not be discouraged,” asked his father. The little boy responded and said,

“Because we haven’t come up to bat yet.”

Ladies and Gentlemen, the last inning is yet to be played, and our star slugger is due up and His name is Jesus. Do you feel like giving up today? Let me remind you, Jesus is due up. Never give up. Amen.