Notes for Preparing to Teach Hebrews VII

Hebrews 10:22-Hebrews 11:25

This session, we are backing up a little bit from where we ended up last time because I want to share about the transition from exhortation or challenge in Hebrews 10:22-25 to warning or even threat in Hebrews 10:26-31. You can probably see this quickly in George Guthrie’s simple framework:

* **10:19-25 = “Draw Near” and “Hold Fast”**
* **10:26-31 = WARNING**
* **10:32-39 = Positive Example from Hearers’ Past with  
   Admonition to Endure to Receive Promise**
* **11:1-25 = Positive Example of OT Faithful.**

**[Guthrie, George, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994), p. 136.]**

**In such a structure, we can clearly see that the reason for what we are to do in verses 19-25 is to avoid the danger described in 10:26-31. So, Let’s look at what we’re supposed to do. Last time, we talked about how “drawing near” to God, as in verse 22, was a technical term for seeking God’s Presence. It probably echoes in our minds with Jesus’ admonition to “seek” so that we may “find” our place in God’s Presence. Notice that the imagery of sprinkling the heart suggests an inner cleansing of our thoughts and motives while the outward cleansing of our bodies suggests the outward sign of an inward change represented in the obedience of baptism. Since we have been given access to God’s Presence, the preacher of Hebrews wants us to make good use of it. We will see this same verb for drawing near in Hebrews 11:6.**

**In verse 23, we are told to “hold fast” to our confession of hope “unwavering.” This is really important as preparation for the upcoming warning that I wanted to go back over it. This word so often translated “hold fast” [CEB, KJV, NASB, NRSV] reminds me of when my father was trying to teach me how to drive. You have to remember that my father remembered the days of horses and wagons and my grandpa shouting instructions at his brothers. If you wanted a horse to stop, you pulled back on the reins which, instinctively, pulled the horse’s head up to slow it down. We didn’t have a driver-training car like this one pictured on my slide with the brake on the instructor’s side, so when Dad thought I was going to fast, he’d yell, “Hold her head up!” Which, of course, meant absolutely nothing to me when I first started driving.**

**Well, this word in Greek would most literally mean “hold it down” rather than “hold it up.” With the adverb, “unwavering,” it would mean to hold it down so it can’t get away. Here, it means to hang on so tightly to God’s promises that we can’t be budged. The promises are described as the “confession of our hope [CEB, NASB, NEB, NRSV] or “profession of our faith” [KJV]. That word for confession or profession means literally, “to say the same as.” In other words, to agree. And we agree with God that we can depend on God’s follow-through in our lives. But it also means that we agree with each other that we can depend on God’s promises for our lives. One of the reasons we come together in worship is to reinforce the understanding of God’s blessing and dependability that we hold in common. And it helps us not to let go. This is particularly important when both Jews and Romans are persecuting the believers. They needed a support group. And whenever we face, if not persecution, difficulty, we need that support group to remind us that God is still at work and God’s promises are still valid for our lives.**

**Bear with me because this all ties together in a moment. Look at verse 24 where it says to motivate each other to love and to show that love practically in good works. “…holding on to the ‘confession of hope’ must manifest itself in the visible witness of that hope, especially in terms of continued, open association with the ‘people of God,’ who live for that hope (as opposed to hiding or terminating those connections so as to escape the negative consequences of association with the name of Jesus (10:25, 37-39).” [DeSilva, David A. *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000], p. 341.]**

**While we seek God’s Presence and remind ourselves of the basics of our total dependence upon God, we put our faith to work in taking care of each other and challenging each other to become more like Jesus. That word for “challenging” or “motivating” is literally, “to provoke” in the Greek. Implicitly, it seems to suggest that we, as believers, tend to get lazy if we aren’t stirred up. It tells us that we need to come together even if it makes us uncomfortable, even if it’s like acupuncture and causes a small pin-prick of discomfort to start the body working to heal itself.**

**But if we deprioritize our coming together in worship, we lose our strength, our resolve, our sense of purpose, and our awareness that our lives and even human history are going somewhere, somewhere guaranteed in God’s will. The great British scholar F. F. Bruce puts it quite simply: “This will never happen, however, if they keep one another at a distance. Therefore, every opportunity of coming together and enjoying their fellowship in faith and hope must be welcomed and used for mutual encouragement.” [Bruce, F. F. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1964), p. 253.] I love this little cartoon where the school of little fish band together to scare off the larger fish by appearing bigger than they are. In a sense, we need to gather together because we become stronger as we participate in the body of Christ.**

**And don’t forget the deadline at the end of verse 25. It reminds us that the Day of the Lord’s Return is near. Every day, it’s nearer than it was when Hebrews was written. Every day, it’s nearer than when the book became part of the New Testament. Every day, it’s nearer than when we first read it. That day when Jesus returns is significant because it is then that our hope will be fulfilled and we will no longer see through a glass darkly, but we’ll see Him face-to-face. However, it is also a deadline because it reminds us that we need to be taking the message to others lest they face the judgment, the condemnation of one who has rejected God’s salvation in Jesus.**

**THE WARNING**

**The warning is about those who voluntarily choose, not under constraint, to reject God’s salvation and the fellowship of the church. In Numbers 15:22, 24, the person who sinned unknowingly or unwillingly, could be forgiven. In Numbers 15:30, the person who defiantly [lit. “sinned with a high hand” in the Hebrew] was to be removed from the camp and hence, the people of God. Even in the old covenant, there was no provision for this person who chose to rebel in the face of God’s overt generosity.**

**In this case, it isn’t the person who has heard a sermon and rejected it. This is the person who has accepted a relationship with God into her or his life and then, decides not to go through with it. It’s not something that relates to unbelievers; this is something tied to those who know better and absolutely decide to reject God. “In the context of Hebrews, the most likely understanding of ‘deliberate sin’ is that it is the conscious, intentional, and permanent rejection of Christ. After all, there can be no salvation outside Christ. And it seems that the original readers of Hebrews were facing temptation to reject Christ in the face of persecution (10:32-36).” [Campbell, Constantine R. and Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the New Testament as Christian Scripture: A Literary, Canonical, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), p. 319.]**

**Remember what I quoted you when we were discussing Chapter 6: “…anyone worried about committing the unforgivable sin or becoming apostate, hasn’t done so. Apostates are by definition hardened to God and arrogant to what He has said by the Son.” Jobes, Karen H*., Letters to the Church: A Survey of Hebrews and the General Epistles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), p. 141.] Yet, she goes on to write: “There is a difference between ‘backsliding’ and apostasy, but everyone who apostatizes starts in that direction by backsliding (though the converse is not true; not everyone who backslides will inevitably apostatize.”**

**There is no cure, because Jesus isn’t about to die again for someone who has already stomped all over His gift. Since verse 27 talks about judgment and fire, it can’t help but remind me of God’s frightening, consuming fire of judgment in Isaiah 33:14, as well as God’s threat of judgment by fire in Deuteronomy 32:22. Writers in between the testaments picked up on those references so that we end up with the lake of fire in Revelation. Remember Jesus’ account of the rich man and Lazarus? What was the Lord’s response when he asked for someone from the dead to go back and warn his brothers? It was that they had ignored/rejected what God had already provided.**

**This idea that rejecting a gift from a powerful patron was shameful can even be seen outside the New Testament. Remember Marcus Brutus, the Roman Senator who helped conspire against Julius Caesar? He once declared war on a city in Turkey (Xanth, Ksantos) near Antalaya because they rejected a gift from him. Plutarch quotes him as saying: “The Xanthians, through their madness in rejecting my kindnesses, have made their country into their grave.” [Plutarch, “Marcus Brutus” in *Makers of Rome* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1977), p. 225.] So, the readers/hearers of Hebrews would have clearly understood God’s reaction.**

**Note that verse 30 reiterates this by quoting from Deuteronomy 32:35 and Deuteronomy 32:36. The main difference is that the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 32:36 can be taken positively, but the LXX (Greek translation of Deuteronomy) is negative. Nonetheless, Verses 32-39 reminds the listeners or readers of the sermon/book/letter that they have discovered God’s strength and the strength of each other in the past so that the author can challenge or exhort them to stand firm and remain faithful.**

**If I were teaching this section, I would ask students to list the good things the Hebrew believers had done in the past. A quick look will provide:**

1. **Stood ground under pressure (v. 32)**
2. **Insulted and abused (v. 33)**
3. **Fellow-sufferers with other victims (v. 33)**
4. **Showed sympathy for prisoners (v. 34)**
5. **Didn’t panic when wealth confiscated (v. 34)  
   (because trusted God’s promises more)**

**Also, when you see Habakkuk quoted in verses 37-38, don’t forget that the entire book begins with a lament in which the prophet complains that God doesn’t seem to be hearing him and that God doesn’t seem to be acting consistently with what a just God should be doing. The part quoted is where God tells Habakkuk to wait and both judgment and deliverance will be on their way.**

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**As for the final verse of the chapter, I very much like a sermon from Alexander Maclaren: “The thought of the text is substantially this—those who believe win their souls; they acquire them for their possession. We talk colloquially about ‘people that cannot call their souls their own.’ That is a very true description of all men who are not lords of themselves through faith in Jesus Christ. ‘They who believe to the gaining of their own souls’ is the meaning of the writer here.”**

**[Maclaren, Alexander, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: Volume XV: Second Timothy, Titus, Philemon and Hebrews, Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1942), p. 99.]**

**Of course, my favorite chapter in Hebrews is Hebrews 11. It blows my mind, right from the beginning. It tells us that faith IS reality. Since the Greek word for “faith” or “faithfulness” is used 32 times in Hebrews, it seems to be very relevant to believers who are either under severe attack or face imminent persecution.**

**Here are some quotes from my sermon on Hebrews 11 and two from two other Baptist pastors.**

* **“The very first thing we must learn about faith is that it is substance. Faith is not glorified imagination and faith is not some cloudy, ephemeral experience. Faith is reality. 'Our text, says , 'Faith is the substance…’" Pastor Johnny**
* **“Faith enables the believing soul to treat the future as present and the invisible as visible.” Manley Beasley**
* **“Faith is believing something that is not yet so to *be* so in order that it may become so.” George Bradley**

**Thomas Aquinas wrote: *Fides est habitus mentis, quo inchoatur vita eterna in nobis, faciens intellectum assentire non apparentibus.* The Latin could be translated as: “Faith is a mental attitude, by which eternal life begins in us, making the intellect agree with what isn’t apparent.” [my translation]**

**So, faith is also evidence collection. In a court of law or a laboratory, evidence is something that can be perceived as tangible reality. Faith is the evidence of what we can’t see. But evidence is what one builds a case upon. I assert that the Christian life needs to be one of constantly collecting evidence in prayer and deeds. We are wrong to say, "If I only had enough faith. It's not our faith that God wants, it's faith coming from Jesus. That is the only faith that wins God's approval. If I must get to San Francisco in 4 hours, I don't put my faith in a train -I hop a plane. Even so, if I want to please God I don't put my faith in what I can do, but in what Christ has done and is doing. JESUS is both source and object-of our faith.**

**Remember when Peter walked on the water? What happened? #1 -He heard the word. Jesus said, “Come.” Faith comes by hearing. ·#2 -He received faith from Jesus. As long as his eyes were on Jesus, God kept blessing, but when he looked at what he was doing, he sank. Faith as trust and certainty means keeping your eyes, your attention, focused on Jesus, on God’s agenda. Faithfulness means hanging on tight (holding fast, holding unswervingly), even when things may look bad for God from a human perspective.**

**In summary, consider what Udo Schnelle wrote about this section: “Faith is an absolute dependence on the invisible, the heavenly world, which in contrast to the earthly visible world is unchanging and imperishable. Believers can shelter their lives from the vicissitudes of the visible world only by aligning themselves, through faith, with the heavenly, unchanging world.” [Schnelle, Udo, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 643.]**

**Indeed, even in the so-called “Roll Call of Faith” in Hebrews 11: “The key expression here is ‘did not receive what was promised.’” [William G. Johnsson, “The Pilgrimage Motif in the Book of Hebrews” in Journal of Biblical Literature 97:2 (June, 1978) (Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature, 1978), p. 240.] The heroes of faith may not have received the promise in their lifetimes or experienced the promise as they expected, but God usually came through in bigger and better, if unexpected ways. This would have meant a lot to believers expecting the return of Jesus, as per the promise in 10:37.**

**So, the preacher/author of Hebrews wants the believers to know that looks can be deceiving and that what God is doing may not be entirely visible to the human eye/experience. So, the first thing to be learned about faith is that it transforms expectations into reality, as we noted a moment ago, and provides evidence of what you aren’t yet seeing/experiencing. That’s why verse 3 speaks of creation, the making substantial reality out of what seems invisible and insubstantial. It lets us know that God works on a different playing field than humanity does, that we play traditional two-dimensional Chess while God “plays” a multi-dimensional Chess, as it were.**

**Roll Call of Faith**

**First up is Abel. His very name means, “breath, wisp, empty.” It sounds like he wasn’t meant to last very long. His brother’s name is Cain. Eve tells us that his name comes from the verb “to gain,” which would be pronounced “kah-nah,” but it is spelled as “keye-yihn,” which means “spear.” Maybe his name is a warning that when people selfishly try to acquire, they are apt to turn violent. Nonetheless, our text tells us that by means of faith, Abel offered a better sacrifice than Cain. Notice that it is the faith, the attitude, that makes the difference—NOT the material used in the sacrifice. Because of his attitude, Abel took the time to give of his best. Cain isn’t singled out as doing so. In fact, God later asks him why he’s complaining. God says that if he had done well, he’d be rewarded for doing well. Then, he is warned about his attitude which is “crouching” like a dark monster lying in ambush for him.**

**So, faith determined Abel’s attitude which, in turn, determined Abel’s actions which, of course, pleased God. The author of Hebrews reminds us that even though his life was short (a wisp, a breath?), God still speaks through him. He may not have seen what God was accomplishing through him, but it has lasting importance.**

**Next up is Enoch. His very name means “Dedicated.” Indeed, he was so dedicated that it was said that he “walked with God.” Remember that “walking” in both the world of the Old Testament and particularly in the Graeco-Roman world referred to a complete lifestyle. Enoch is one of the rare ones because he was taken up by God without seeing death. So, he saw the fulfillment of living out his life in faith and becomes an example for us (though we won’t be spared death).**

**Enoch was rewarded because he pleased God and verse 6 expands on this by reminding the hearers and readers of the book that one cannot please God without faith. Faith is both certainty and action. Verse 6 reminds us that it is certainty, believing in God’s existence despite the vast array of doubts our enemy throws at us, but it is also the action of building our lives where we count on God’s benevolence, God’s goodness. Faith is both the trust of believing and the faithfulness of living in the assurance that God wants what is best for us.**

**That leads us to Noah in verse 7. His name means “Rest,” but his faithfulness did not lead to inaction. Rather, it was a partnership with God. And yes, it all begins with awe, even a bit of fear. What was it Mrs. Beaver said about Aslan, the symbolic figure for Jesus as the Lion of Judah in the Narnia series?** “If there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.” God can be terrifying if we do not wrap ourselves in faith that what Jesus did to prepare the way for our entering His Presence.

By partnering with God, Noah was able to accomplish something, building the ark—that big, boxy boat with no steering and no propulsion—which would save his life and the life of his family. They could “rest” in the safety and care of God’s salvation. Remember that even though Noah built the ark, God shut the door to make sure it was safe and seaworthy. It’s good that through our service and dedication, we can accomplish things with and for God, but we should never forget that God seals the deal, God provides the finishing touches.

It's also important to notice that Noah’s actions “critiqued the world.” When we follow the invisible world of God’s purpose and power as opposed to the visible world of what we think we understand and we think we can control, we give a negative review to secular wisdom which falls short of God’s plan and purpose. We need to examine whether our lives provide any critique of the “world.”

Finally, Noah became an heir of righteousness by faith. That means that because of faith which, unbeknownst to Noah at the time, pointed to Jesus as the ultimate ark of salvation, God treated Noah as “not guilty” and able to stand in a relationship with Him. However, notice that even though Noah is credited with re-seeding the earth and receiving the covenant marked by the rainbow from God, he couldn’t have seen the full extent of his inheritance of righteousness in his lifetime.

In the video, I give a lot of information on Abram/Abraham, but what should have been most encouraging to the hearers/readers of Hebrews would very likely have been that key expression I noted earlier, “did not receive what was promised.”

Hebrews 11:8-12 has Abraham “sojourn,” “as in a foreign land,” and “he looked forward to the city.” All of this is temporary and incomplete, just as the hearers and readers of Hebrews are experiencing it.

Hebrews 11:13-16 notes that Abraham “died, …not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar,” “were strangers and exiles on the earth,” and “were seeking a homeland,” and “desiring a better country, a heavenly one.” We read that God has prepared for them “a city,” but we don’t see them with the complete fulfillment.

Hebrews 11:22 has Joseph making his command to remove his bones and take them when they leave Egypt as looking to the future, “the exodus.” Nevertheless, he died without seeing the land of promise, even as many believers have died without seeing Jesus’ return and the consummation of the Kingdom of God in its eternal fullness.

As Johnsson reiterated in his article on the Book of Hebrews: “The thrust of Hebrews 11 seems clear: God’s people throughout the OT looked beyond the present life to a heavenly reward. They sighted the better country, the city of God, but did not attain to it.” (p. 240) So, in a very real sense, the believers hearing and reading Hebrews for the first time should have taken courage that they hadn’t been able to see the completion of everything they had expected from God in their lives. Indeed, we should recognize this pattern ourselves—living each day with expectation, but being aware that God’s perfect timing may not be the same as ours.

Next session, we will pick up with Moses.