

“An Anchor for the Soul: Punishment or Persecution?”

Hebrews 10:26-39

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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Let me begin by wishing you all a happy Easter. I know what you're thinking. Doesn't he know that Easter was last week? Can't he see that all the Easter lilies are gone, just like the people who only show up once a year? Here's the thing. For the churches that follow a liturgical calendar, it's actually Easter all the way to Pentecost on May 15. But we're Presbyterians. We're Reformed. We celebrate Easter even more than that. Every Sunday is Easter. You should be celebrating today every bit as much as you did last week! To help, I want to talk again about the true meaning of Easter.

In a nutshell, Easter is really about heaven and hell and how you get there and that's what today's passage is all about, too. Heaven has been described as the place where the police are British, the chefs are Italian, the mechanics are German, the lovers are French and everything's organized by the Swiss. In hell, the police are German, the chefs are British, the mechanics are French, the lovers are Swiss, and everything is organized by the Italians.

These days nobody likes to talk about hell. Well, some do but then nobody likes to talk *to* those people. For lots of people today the idea of hell is just plain offensive and they will gladly tell you that. There are many people who consider themselves Christians who would go so far as to say that hell doesn't exist. They are just unable to reconcile the idea of God as good and loving with God as angry and judging. In fact, this is one of the biggest objections to Christianity that non-believers have. They say, "I just can't believe in a God who would send people to hell for making a mistake."

They are not the first people to struggle with that, either. By the middle of the second century a Christian leader named Marcion decided that the teachings of Jesus were incompatible with the God of the Old Testament and as a result he rejected the Old Testament entirely. One of

Marcion's biggest complaints is that God would judge and punish.

I suspect you're not crazy about the idea of God judging and punishing you, either. You prefer to think of God as kind, loving, forgiving, like a "grandfather in the sky." If that's the case, your God is too small. The Bible is filled with passages that show that God is angry with sin and that He stands ready to punish sinners. Verse 30 quotes from Deuteronomy 32 and Psalm 50 in the Old Testament saying, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay," and "The Lord will judge his people." In Isaiah 13 God says, "I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity."

In case you are beginning to think like Marcion, remember that Jesus also spoke about judgment. A lot. Matthew 13, "So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Matthew 18: "If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire." Matthew 22: "Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'" And in Matthew 25: "These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

The point is, as one commentator put it, "You cannot have the Jesus of the Scriptures without the doctrines of judgment and hell." Charles Spurgeon said, "Think lightly of hell and you will think lightly of the cross."

We don't really have time this morning to talk about how the Bible describes hell. As we just heard, Jesus sometimes describes it as fire and sometimes as darkness. What's important is that it's a punishment for sin and the real punishment is separation from God. The physical pain pails in comparison to the pain of

being separated from your creator. And that's exactly what Jesus experienced on the cross. When we say the Apostles' Creed each week we confess that Jesus "descended into hell." What we mean is that he experienced hell, which is a separation from God the Father. The weight of sin was put on him. Just before he died he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!"

The night that Jesus was arrested he was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane and he was anticipating what he was about to go through. It was so agonizing that he began to sweat drops of blood. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Jesus experienced punishment for sin. He experienced for the first time separation from God. He descended into hell.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that if we go on sinning deliberately that we can expect the same judgment and punishment. Those are sobering words. Anybody here successfully been sin-free since you started following Christ? Anybody here been sin-free since you've been sitting here? Probably not. Each of us is painfully aware of our own sin and often painfully aware of each other's sin because it affects us, too. So what do we make of this warning?

The people that are described here are NOT Christians who have sinned again after following Jesus. That would be all of us. These are also NOT people who do not know Christ. Here he's talking about people who know the truth about Jesus. They know that He is God in person. They have read the Scriptures, know about the miracles Jesus performed. They have professed a faith in Christ and then later rejected Him. They commit what Jesus called the "unforgivable sin" of blaspheming the Holy Spirit, or as verse 29 puts it, they've "outraged the Spirit of grace." In other words they blatantly and intentionally reject the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. For them "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins." I will say that I firmly believe that as long as you are still alive it's not too late but you also don't know what

tomorrow holds for you, which is why 2 Corinthians 6:2 says, "Behold, *now* is the favorable time, *now* is the day of salvation." If you are wrestling with who Jesus is and with committing your life to Him, don't put it off.

Well the writer of Hebrews is an excellent pastor and so now that he has warned his congregation of the punishment of abandoning Christ he turns to provide them with encouragement. Verse 32 begins "But." My preaching professor used to say that standing in the middle of every great sermon is a big "but." Listen to the context. "The Lord will judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. *But* recall the former days."

He is calling on the members of that tiny house church who are facing persecution for their faith to remember. Remember how you endured once you knew Christ. Sometimes we like to talk about the "good ol' days." That's not what he's talking about here. He says, "remember how you endured a hard struggle with sufferings."

When you and I go through hard things we tend to think, "why is God punishing me? What did I do to deserve this?" Hebrews makes it clear that what these followers are going through is not punishment. God often uses trials and difficulties to shape and mold us. A number of studies have been done and the results are always the same. When asked about a time when their faith grew the most, it's always during a time of difficulty. Hebrews 10 says, "remember how God sustained you before. Remember how Jesus suffered on the cross. Remember that God is in control." God uses our trials and difficulties to help us to become more like Christ.

Sometimes the trials that God allows are outright persecution. None of us has experienced real persecution for our faith. That may be changing for us and of course Christians in the Middle East understand it all too well. The writer of Hebrews reminds his flock about the persecution they faced years earlier. They were publicly ridiculed and insulted. Some of them were put into prison or had their land and

possessions taken. He reminds them how God got them through those times and how they were a time when they grew the most. It was the time when their Church really shined. When some were put into prison, others when and visited them. When some were insulted and ridiculed, others stood with them. Through the entire ordeal they displayed the truth of the Gospel, the hope that is not of this world.

He tells them to remember where they've been, what God did then. And he tells them to remember where they are going. Verse 34 says, "you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one." Their future was guaranteed and it was way better than the present. What he's done is drawn them a picture. He said, "Here's where you've been, and here's where you know you're going. Things may look bad but you know you're going to end up over here. That's where we get the

application, the heart of this passage. Between the past and the future is right now. Verses 35 and 36 say, "Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised."

Whatever you're going through now, you are called to face it and endure it with faith. But more than that, you are called to endure it with joy. As verse 34 says, "you *joyfully* accepted the plundering of your property. When you are confident of where you're going because Jesus has already set your anchor in heaven, then no matter what is happening you can endure it with joy because you know that God's got this."

Amen