

A better possession

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Yeah, so today's Bible reading is taken from the book of Hebrews, chapter 10, starting at verse 26 and reading on to verse 29.

Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified and has outraged the spirit of grace?

For we know him who said, Vengeance is mine, I will repay. And again, 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 when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.

[1 : 23] 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.

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.

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. Good morning, everyone.

As Phil said, my name is Charlie, and I'm a member of the church family here. Peter Nelson has already pointed out that there is a rule about having three points to a sermon.

[2 : 29] There's a handout on the back, by the way. It looks like I haven't followed that rule, but I have. Because what looks like point two and three are in fact sub-points of point one. Before we begin, let me pray.

Father in heaven, we pray that you would open up your word to us now, and that you would give us humble hearts to hear your words and respond with faith.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Now, as a young boy, I didn't always love going on walks with my parents.

I thought they were pretty boring. But when we went to places like the Lake District or Wales, they were a lot more fun. Not because it was more beautiful.

I wasn't the sort of eight-year-old who said, Wow, mum, look at the view. But when we went to those places, my sisters and I could go exploring.

[3 : 33] And that generally meant we were 20 meters off that way, up a hill in some trees. But I remember this one time in St. David's, in Pembrokeshire, Wales. And we were on a coastal walk, and my older sister and I, we went exploring.

And so we left the path that my parents were on, and we headed off down to the right, I think it was. And to start with, it was fine. Steep, but manageable for an eight-year-old with average scrambling skills and zero concept of risk.

But it basically got to the point where we were standing on a cliff, on a narrow ledge high above the beach, with a sheer drop-off beneath us. And one false step, and it could have been quite nasty.

And we had intentionally wandered away from the path. But what we didn't know was the danger that we were walking into. See, the Christians our author was writing to were in that same peril.

They'd become tired of following Jesus. And so they had started to, or were in danger of, drifting away from the path. That is, Jesus. In the language of verse 38, shrink back.

[4 : 48] That is, an intentional drifting into the background. But it seems what they didn't know was the danger that they were putting themselves in. And this morning, our passage addresses the foolishness of wandering away.

And so the aim this morning is that we would not throw away our confidence in the gospel. And you can see it there in verse 35. 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. Last week in Hebrews, we saw just how good the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was.

It was a single sacrifice. One death to cover all sin, past, present, and future. It was a sinless sacrifice.

The kind of sacrifice that doesn't just cleanse our bodies, but cleanses our consciences as well. Think of that. Who would kill for a clean conscience? And it was a sufficient sacrifice.

[5 : 59] Nothing else is needed to enter the gates of heaven. The way is open. And so because God has laid out the most precious peace offering in the death of his son, well, the stakes have been raised.

Accept, and we walk straight into heaven. Reject, and there will be perilous consequences. We will return to the encouraging tone a bit later, but before we do that, you'll have noticed in the first reading, the first bit of our reading, that our author doesn't pull any punches.

There is no understatement here. There's no sugarcoating, no euphemisms. But it is our conviction here at Grace Church that the Bible is the way God speaks.

And so when we come across bits that are hard to hear, we do not shy away from them or skip over them, but we come and listen humbly. And as I've thought about these verses, I think there are three ways in which our author convinces us not to throw away our confidence in the gospel, and they are outlined on the handout for you.

Firstly, it is a strong warning. Secondly, a call to look back. And finally, a call to look forward. To the great reward. Firstly then, beware.

[7 : 25] Deliberate rejection will not escape judgment. It's worth noting this morning that today's warning addresses apostasy.

That is, people who have once called themselves Christians, but either have or are in danger of drifting away. And given that many of us call ourselves Christians here, this warning, it speaks to us.

Verse 26 then. For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving a knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

That phrase, if we go on sinning deliberately, this then is not a warning designed to shake the true believer's assurance.

It is not aimed at the person who is repentant of their sin. Jesus absolutely died for the repentant person. This warning is addressing a pattern of life.

[8 : 43] The sin in mind is most likely drawing back from Jesus and the fellowship of his people. Going after other systems which look like they offer forgiveness, cleansing, a clear conscience, but are based off what we can offer instead of the grace of the Lord Jesus.

But it could also be the desire to indulge in other sins without restraint or restriction. Think of sexual immorality, greed, deceit.

If we carry on sinning like this deliberately, willfully turning our backs on Jesus after receiving a knowledge of the truth, I take it that is the gospel that Jesus died once for all to purify us from sins.

If we carry on like that, then we are not washed clean. The only thing that awaits us at that point is judgment and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

Think of the devastating wildfires that tore through L.A. back in January. Tens of thousands were displaced. Very sadly, 29 people died.

[10 : 02] That is a very small glimpse of the fire that awaits those who draw back from Jesus. But it won't be displacement. It will be a fire that utterly consumes and destroys the adversary.

There will be no escape. It's a devastating picture, isn't it? And just in case we think God might be exaggerating here, all bark, no bite, then sub-point, look at the law.

Verse 28. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

That was the punishment when all God had given them was the law of Moses. Yes, a wonderful expression of God's character, but at the end of the day, two stone tablets.

Verse 29. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God?

[11 : 13] You see, to disregard God's law, well, that's one thing. But to scorn the sacrifice of his one and only Son, there is no greater insult that we could throw at God.

And so the greater the gift, the worse the rejection, the more fearful the punishment. But don't just look at the law, look at Scripture.

Verse 30. For we know him who said, vengeance is mine, I will repay. And again, the Lord will judge his people. Both of these quotations, they come from Deuteronomy 32, which is basically a road map.

It is one big prophecy. And it set out how Israel's history would go. It set out how they would eventually abandon God and go after other gods.

And it set out how God would punish them with earthly calamities once they did that. And the key thing is, Deuteronomy 32 got it right.

[12 : 22] To a T. Everything it predicted came to pass. So when God says, vengeance is mine, I will repay. And the Lord will judge his people.

Well, we know he means it. God is not exaggerating when he warns us about the punishment that awaits desertion. God is all bark and all bite. God is all bark and all bite.

It may be that some of us here need to hear this today. Perhaps we feel the temptation to just slowly drift out of picture into the background. Being a Christian is just too shameful, too humiliating, causes too much grief.

Perhaps there is a particular sin that we don't want to relinquish to King Jesus. He can have this, but he can't have that. Now, before we hear the encouragement in the rest of our verses, we need to hear this warning.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. It's not a small thing. It's not a, I'll blag my way out of it when I get there kind of thing.

[13 : 32] It's a fearful thing. This warning, it is designed to make us tremble. And it's designed to make us hold on to our confidence now.

It would be foolish to throw it away. So beware. Hopefully that is the heavy stuff done. And now, look back.

This is the second way our author encourages us not to throw away our confidence. Look back. So look down with me at verse 32. But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.

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.

Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. You may have heard of the Navy SEALs.

[14 : 49] They are America's most elite fighting force, the creme de la creme of soldiers. And part of the selection process for the Navy SEALs is something called Hell Week.

And in Hell Week, recruits are put through every kind of rigorous exercise. They have to carry huge logs on their shoulders, run huge distances, paddling in boats on the ocean.

only the very best of Grace Church Dulwich would get in. Soldiers are wet, they are cold, they are utterly sleep deprived, and by day three, they are seeing things that are not actually there.

And if you want to quit, all you have to do is ring a bell in the middle of the camp. It's as simple as that. Just ring the bell. Once you ring the bell, you can get warm, have a cup of tea, have some sleep.

The torture would be over. In fact, trainers are regularly screaming at recruits to ring the bell. You shouldn't even be on the course, let alone a Navy SEAL, probably with more colourful language.

[16 : 06] Unsurprisingly, lots of recruits ring that bell. But when the other soldiers see someone heading over to the bell, they say one of two things, and we'll come to the second thing later.

But one thing they say is this. Look how far you've come. Don't ring that bell. Look how far you've come. If you quit now, everything you've endured so far was a waste.

Don't throw that away. And our author is basically saying the same thing to his readers. Look how far you've come.

Look how much you've already given up. If you drift away now, that sacrifice that you've made will have all been for nothing. These Christians, they'd been through their own hell week, though it was probably longer than a week.

They'd been publicly exposed to reproach and affliction that is verbally abused, physically afflicted in an openly shameful way. They'd been partners with those so treated.

[17 : 18] They'd taken food, water, clothing to other Christians in prison, publicly sided with the outcasts of society at great risk to their own safety.

They'd even had their own property seized and taken from them because the government was anti-Christian. Look how far you've come, says our writer.

And in fact, not just look how far you've come, but look how much confidence you used to have. If you were willing to endure such great sufferings, even to receive them joyfully, then you must have been confident of a better possession in heaven.

Don't lose that confidence now. I don't know what sufferings or afflictions we experienced when we first became a Christian, or at least when we first decided for ourselves that we would follow Jesus.

I dare say we didn't quite suffer like these Christians suffered, but perhaps we were ashamed for it. I remember when I first turned to Jesus and I was having a conversation with a school friend in a pub and he said to me, oh, I thought you were cleverer than that.

[18 : 46] They're just words, but they can make you feel very, very small, can't they? Maybe you've had the same. Maybe we saw others in the office, at school, be belittled for following Jesus and for the first time we publicly stood by them at a cost to our own social status.

Why did we do that? Or think of the other sacrifices we started to make. Think how much time we started to devote to Jesus when we could have been doing something else, pursuing promotion, more extravagant holidays.

But serving Jesus and his people took priority, turning up to church, to Bible studies. And think about the money we started giving to church or to Christian ministry.

think about what we couldn't buy then because we decided to invest up there in the heavenly possession. We didn't start doing that because deep down we are utterly selfless people who love to deny ourselves what we actually want.

We did it because we trusted in one man, Jesus Christ, who by the most incredible act of love and sacrifice has opened up the doors of heaven to us.

[20 : 12] Let me ask us, do we still have the same thigh and our belly as we did back then? Or has it started to flicker? And would we still make the same sacrifices as we did back then and even greater ones still?

Or have we tired of being ambitious for Jesus? We have already come so far, given up so much, if we drift away now, it will all have been for nothing.

But more than that, we did those things because we were confident that there is a better possession waiting for us, won for us by the Lord Jesus and him alone.

Look back and do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. And lastly then, look forward.

Endurance will secure the great reward. We will read from halfway through verse 34. Since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one, therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.

[21 : 27] 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. Just two observations to make here.

Number one, notice the emphasis on the better possession. We've mentioned it a few times now, but what is it? It's there in verse 34, a better possession and an abiding one.

Verse 35, a great reward. And verse 36, you may receive what is promised. I said that when the Navy SEAL recruits saw someone going to ring that bell, there were two voices that would spring up.

One said, look back and the other one was, think about your goal. I.e., if you can get through hell week and you can get through the rest of the training, you get to put on that coveted uniform, you get to wear the badge, you will officially be a Navy SEAL, one of the most elite soldiers in America.

[22 : 56] And the encouragement is much the same for us. Think about our goal. Two weeks ago, Isaiah gave us this incredible picture of a better possession.

It was a perfect destination where the people there have been washed by the grace of the Lord. They are always surrounded by the presence of the Lord.

And what I thought was the best bit, the whole of God's city under that bridal canopy, all of God's people married to God in the most intimate relationship that can never end.

A glorious picture. As Peter says in his first letter, we have an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, unfading.

If we draw back now, we will lose that. A better possession. And observation number two.

[23 : 56] Notice the emphasis on the little time left that we have to wait. The quote in verse 7, 37 even, isn't actually one quote from the Old Testament.

When the author says, yet a little while, that comes from Isaiah. And when he says, the coming one will come and will not delay, he's taken that from Habakkuk.

But our author has put them together to make a point. And the point is this. There is not much time left to wait until God acts in judgment and vindicates his people.

I'll say that again. There is not much time left to wait until God acts in judgment and vindicates his people. A few years ago, I was cycling in the Alps with some friends.

And we thought we would take on a Tour de France climb. It was called the Col de la Clombière. Apologize for that pronunciation, Natalia. And it was grueling.

[25 : 13] And I was determined to get to the top without stopping. We did have a water break halfway, but from then on, wanted to do it without stopping. And from about a mile from the top, you can actually see the finish line.

So it's a real teaser. But then the mountain bends inwards and you enter this twisty section. And once you go past that viewpoint from a mile out, you actually can't see the end at all.

And you're in this twisty section. And as you come around each corner, you are desperately hoping that that was the last one. And as I was going around this twisty section, I got worn down.

I went around the corner, more to go. Around the corner, more to go. And I stopped, took a breather, get some fluids on board.

Minute goes by, get back on the bike. I go around the next corner and you can guess what happens next. Not 30 meters away is the summit.

[26 : 17] I was absolutely gutted. How much more devastating to stop peddling just before the Lord comes back and calls in his children.

Had someone told me I was 30 meters from the top, I would never have stopped. And once we're not given a precise number here, we are told that the time left is not long.

Just a little while. keep going not long now. How foolish it would be to give up the race just before the end. That said, I think if our author were writing to Grace Church Dulwich today, I think he would absolutely add in verse 39.

Verse 39, But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

And let's pray that we would do that now. Yet a little while and a coming one will come and will not delay, but my righteous one shall live by faith.

[27 : 33] Heavenly Father, we do pray that you would in your mercy make us children who live by faith and do not shrink back.

For we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.