

A Better Reward

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 5th of October 2003. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled A Better Reward and is based on Hebrews chapter 10 verses 26 to 39. Amen. And we pray now that by the power of your spirit, your word will not only inform our minds, but reform our lives and transform our character so that we may be like Jesus and give him glory and honour in all things.

Amen. Amen. One of the longest novels in recent times in English is a novel written by an Indian writer called Vikram Seth, a novel called A Suitable Boy.

Some of you may have dared to read it. I read it a few years ago and thought it was a fantastic novel. It's 1,400 plus pages, so it's very long. I think it's longer than War and Peace, but a friend of mine a few years ago was reading this novel and she's quite a voracious reader and got to about page 1,200 and gave up.

[1 : 50] And I must say I was absolutely staggered that somebody could read 1,200 pages of a novel and not bother with the last 200 pages. Persevere to the end when you've got so far, I thought.

Well, it's a trivial example, but the letter to the Hebrews is written to encourage its readers, original readers and us, to persevere to the very end of our lives in Christian faith and not to give up.

And for those who've been part of this series through the months of this year may remember that the readers of this letter, originally in the first century AD, 30, 40 years after Jesus lived and died and rose again, were in danger of drifting away from the Christian faith.

Chapter 2 began, They were also in danger of growing dull in their understanding, not just in their inability to understand the gospel, but in having minds that were closed to God's word.

So in chapter 5 we read, About this we have much to say that's hard to explain, since some of you have become dull in understanding. And then chapter 6 reminded us that the readers of this letter were in danger of falling away into sin and apostasy.

[3 : 23] So in chapter 6 we read, For it's impossible to restore again to repentance those who've once been enlightened and have tasted the heavenly gift and then have fallen away.

And then we read in the last bit of chapter 10 that I preached on a few weeks ago before I went away, that the readers were in danger of giving up meetings together to worship, that is, gathering together as church each week.

So chapter 10 verse 25 said that they were in danger of neglecting to meet together, but they were exhorted then to encourage each other and all the more as you see the day approaching.

They were the original readers, in danger of drifting from faith, failing to achieve heavenly rest, becoming dull of understanding, drifting into sin and apostasy and giving up meeting together as church.

And in order to counter those dangers, the writer throughout this letter has been extolling the glories of the Lord Jesus Christ, that Jesus is greater and better than anything they could ever read in the Old Testament.

[4 : 31] And most of these Christians had a Jewish background and knew their Old Testaments very well. So the book began by reminding us that Jesus was the full final revelation of God speaking his word to us in Christ.

And that in chapters 1 and 2, that Jesus is greater than angels, so we must pay greater attention to Jesus and not to angels. And that in chapter 3, Jesus was greater than one of the great heroes of the Old Testament, Moses.

So as Moses' word was to be heeded, Jesus even more so. And that the promised land of the Old Testament, the geographical land of Israel was great, the promised rest that Jesus brings of heaven is greater still.

Chapter 4. And just as the priests of the Old Testament were important and significant figures in chapters 5 and 6 of Hebrews, Jesus is the great high priest, greater even than Melchizedek in the Old Testament in chapter 7 here.

As the old covenant of the Old Testament was important, Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant. Chapter 8 told us that. And Jesus is the guarantor of heavenly reality.

[5 : 38] Chapter 9 told us that. And then in the first part of chapter 10, we saw a few weeks ago that the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is far greater and far more effective, far better than any sacrifice of an animal in the Old Testament system.

In sum, Jesus is totally sufficient for us, for our salvation, our Christian life and our faith to the end and for eternity. So that is the great motivation for the Christian readers of this letter originally and here today, to persevere in Christian faith to the end.

And then those words that we saw in the last sermon a few weeks ago on this passage and in fact, which we've just sung part of in the last song. Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain that is through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day approaching.

Jesus is to be our driving force in life, our goal, our passion, our motivation for hanging in there in the Christian faith and persevering to the very last gasp of our life on earth.

[7 : 16] And yet, just as the original readers were in danger of drifting from faith, growing dull in understanding, drifting into sin and apostasy, giving up meeting together, abandoning church and abandoning Jesus Christ, so we too face the same sort of dangers, dangers of drifting, dangers of ending up in persistent sin and apostasy, dangers of losing faith, being distracted by the world, becoming weary of Christian life and living.

Well, just as the privileges of knowing Jesus are great and marvellous as this writer has extolled them through this letter, so too are the warnings great for those who refuse the grace of Jesus. Just as the access to God that Jesus brings us is astonishingly great and gracious, so too are the warnings severe and the punishment severe for those who decline the invitation or turn away from it.

Today's passage is probably the sternest warning in this letter to not to adrift, not to abandon faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

You probably don't need me to tell you that in the Old Testament part of the Bible, there are many accounts of stern, fearful, furious judgment and wrath of God against those who rebel against him, turn their backs on him and disobey him.

[8 : 43] There's the flood in the time of Noah when God punished the earth apart from Noah and his family. There's the destruction of the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in the first book of the Old Testament, the book of Genesis.

There are the plagues against the hard-hearted Pharaoh in Egypt in the book of Exodus. There's the punishment of various Israelites in the wilderness when they rebelled against God and did not obey him or trust him.

And then in the next generation in the entry to the land, the destruction of a man called Achan and his family because of his greed in wanting the spoils of war, disobeying God. And there's leprosy to King Uzziah when he rebelled against God.

And you know various other stories through the Old Testament where God's wrath and judgment and punishment on his and other people for their sin and rebellion against him is fairly ferocious and without mercy.

We fool ourselves if we are conned by the myth that the God of the Old Testament is a ferocious ogre, but the God of the New Testament is a benign Santa Claus grandfather figure.

[9 : 46] Not so. He's the same God of both Testaments. And if the God of the Old Testament is fearful and ferocious in his judgment and punishment, even more so in the New Testament on those who turn away and decline his extraordinary grace in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So the writer here begins in verse 26 of today's passage. If we willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

Now the writer here is not referring to Christians who lapse into occasional sin. We all do that. We all fail God daily in our lives, in our greed, in our lovelessness, our lack of trust, our faithlessness, our prayerlessness, and so on.

And we seek to constantly come back and repent and seek to do what is right. He's addressing here those who willfully persist in sin. That's what he says in verse 26. So it's those who've drifted away from God into lives of disobedience and faithlessness and persist in that path of willful disobedience.

And for such people, he says, there remains no sacrifice for sin because they've turned their back on the one sacrifice, Jesus. So there remains no sacrifice and their destiny is the furious, fearful wrath of God against such people.

[11 : 18] Note too that the people being addressed here are not the pagans of the world who know nothing about God but those who've responded with faith and become Christians and now have turned to willfully persist in lives of sin and rebellion.

for them, the wrath of God is the fiercest you can imagine because they're people who've embraced God's love, they've understood the grace of the cross and of Jesus' death but now turn their back on it and on God.

Yes, in the Old Testament there was fearful wrath without mercy on those who disobeyed God's laws. Verse 28, anyone who's violated the law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.

So if the wrath of God was ferocious in the Old Testament how much more is it for those who've received more from God in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ?

That's the argument. So if Old Testament people of God had received something of God's grace in the Old Testament law and then turned away from it and found wrath from God if we've received even more in the grace of Jesus Christ as we have then the wrath of God is even greater to us.

[12 : 30] So verse 29 goes on to say how much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who've spurned the Son of God profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified and outraged the Spirit of grace?

Now let me say that sin is not simply breaking God's law although it is that but it's more than that. The language of verse 29 as I've just read it is very striking language.

Those who willfully persist in sin are not just guilty of doing the wrong thing. What they have done is highly offensive personally to God.

See the language. Firstly, they have spurned the Son of God. Now the Greek word that's used there to translate it here as spurned has also used in the context of trampling underfoot.

It's as though somehow we're just walking over Jesus showing the utmost contempt and disdain for him as a person as God's Son. It's as though we're sort of stamping on him and twisting our foot like you see some people stomping out their cigarettes as though trying to disintegrate him under our foot.

[13 : 43] That's highly offensive spurning the Son of God like that. And then the second expression that's used profaned the blood of the covenant by which they're sanctified.

Well the blood of the covenant is Jesus' death on the cross. And we've seen already in this letter how powerful that blood is to bring us sanctification and forgiveness and perfection in the eyes of God ultimately.

So those who willfully persist in sin are profaning that blood. They're saying that Jesus' death is nothing. They're showing contempt and disdain for Jesus dying on the cross. The act of greatest love that the world has ever seen.

They're turning their backs on such a thing. And then thirdly verse 29 says they have outraged the spirit of grace. God's Holy Spirit. Not just disobeyed but outraged.

High personal insults and offence to God. For those who have understood the gospel embraced it and now drifted away into willful and persistent sin.

[14 : 44] You see sin just doesn't break God's law. Sin breaks God's heart. And that's the language of verse 29 here. Now if somebody I know a little bit or hardly know at all insults me or is rude to me or something like that it hurts but it probably hurts mildly.

But if somebody you know well who you love well who is close to you if they show disgust at you or disdain to you or contempt to you or treat you badly or spurn you then that pierces to your heart doesn't it?

The closer someone is to you when they show you contempt the greater the hurt. And that's the argument here. Dealing with people who are Christians who've been loved so graciously by God and received with faith the grace of Jesus dying on the cross and then turn their back on it and pursued a course of willful sin.

That doesn't just break God's law it breaks his heart. And God is highly insulted and highly offended and such people face his vengeance.

Verse 30 We know the one who said vengeance is mine I'll repay. And as God said that in the Old Testament it applies in the New to his people who turn their back on him. Vengeance is mine says the Lord and I will repay.

[16 : 11] And that is not a prospect that we should countenance lightly. As verse 31 says it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Not that God's anger and wrath against us is capricious. It's not as though we can never know where we stand with God as though is he going to have got out of bed on the right side or the wrong side today. We know where we stand with God because his righteous anger and wrath against us is directed at willful disobedience against him.

It's not that God is capricious or just high tempered or hot tempered so is it a good day to talk to God or not? His temper his wrath his anger is directed to sin.

If our sin is forgiven if we've sought repentance then we know that we have access into the very holy place of God that's what we've seen in recent weeks. And that's not access into a benign grandfatherly grotto either.

It's access to the holy God of the universe. The God whose wrath and punishment against willful sin is ferocious and furious and fearful and yet to that same God through the grace and blood of Jesus we have complete freedom and access.

[17 : 25] Well this is an urgent plea to the readers of this letter and the writer in order to provoke them and motivate them to keep on in Christian faith now turns in the next paragraph to remind them of their good start.

That is they've started well the Christian life and faith started it very well indeed but now they're in danger of giving up for all sorts of different reasons. So he reminds them of their past faith their good start.

In verse 32 he says recall those earlier days when after you'd been enlightened that is after you'd become Christians you endured a hard struggle with sufferings. Now we don't know what sufferings specifically they were there's probably persecution as we'll see in a minute but there may be other difficulties and sufferings they've had.

It's not easy to be a Christian in our world today it was probably just as hard if not harder in the first century where in the massive Roman empires the Christian faith was so small initially.

Christian living is not easy and these Christians had started Christian life and faith and they'd undergone various sufferings and kept on in faith. Those sufferings and adversities had not destroyed their faith.

[18 : 38] That was a good start. Secondly verse 33 tells us that they'd been exposed publicly to abuse and persecution. Possibly like St Paul brought before the authorities charged with trumped up charges just because they're Christians.

Heaped abuse upon spat upon perhaps reviled rebuked and so on. And yet and possibly economic type sanctions. You know you live in a little town in the ancient Greco-Roman empire you're one of a few handful of people who are Christians in the little town and so the big operators of the businesses and shops when they see you become Christians and declining to worship the emperor or worship the pagan gods well we're going to charge you more for our products.

We're not going to sell you our products. Those sorts of economic sanctions were very common. They're still common in some countries of our world where Christians suffer that sort of economic persecution. People would lose their jobs if they'd become Christians.

Expelled from their families perhaps if they'd become Christians. So all this sort of persecution these readers had faced and kept on in their faith in the initial days. And then the end of verse 33 and into the next verse say that sometimes they were partners with those so treated for you had compassion for those who were in prison.

That is not every one of them was perhaps persecuted but when their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ were persecuted they didn't run away like the disciples did when Jesus was arrested. They stood by their friends.

[20 : 07] They visited them in prison. To have compassion is probably a weak translation here. They had partnership fellowship or koinonia is the Greek word here. That is when you're thrown into prison in the ancient world you need somebody to come and bring you food.

You didn't get meals provided in prison there. These were Christians who did not shy away or shrink back in those early days. They were prepared to stand by their fellow Christians who had been persecuted or abused or thrown into prison.

And then the last thing that's described about their early life, a striking thing indeed in verse 34, you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions. What an astonishing thing.

Cheerfully accept the plundering of your possessions. That is the context is probably that here's a couple, a family in a little village or town, they've become Christians and so the rest of the town is out to get them.

And so they plunder their house, take away their possessions, destroy the house, burn it all up, whatever. And these Christians in their early days have cheerfully accepted such abuse.

[21 : 14] Astonishing to think, isn't it? But the context in which they were able cheerfully to accept that is that as the end of verse 34 says, they knew that they possessed something better and more lasting.

Here are Christians who are doing exactly what Jesus said would happen and how they should respond in the second reading we heard today in Luke's Gospel in chapter 6. Sometimes we hear on TV or the radio of people whose house has been destroyed by a fire or an earthquake or whatever and standing in the ashes, people say I've lost everything.

Christians can never say that. These Christians seem to have lost all their earthly possessions as a matter of persecution. But they knew they possessed something greater that nobody could take away.

And that's why they had cheerfulness or joy. Not that they were pleased that all their stuff would go, but their joy came because they had the most important treasure in heaven and no one could take it.

That's the perspective on life that these Christians had in their early days, that they're now in danger of giving up and abandoning and drifting away from. Martin Luther, the German reformer in a hymn, put it this way, and though they take our life, goods, honour, child and wife, though we must let all go, they will not profit so.

[22 : 41] To us belongs the kingdom, freedom, the greatest possession of all, that nobody can take from us. So these Christians to whom the writer is writing this letter have started well.

They've endured sufferings, persecution, abuse, all their possessions taken away in some cases, and they've still stayed on as Christians through all that adversity. But now, for whatever reason, they're in danger of drifting away, of giving up, of being weary in the Christian life, it's interesting that so often we think that adversity is our adversary, but in Christian life often adversity is our ally, because in adversity often our faith is strengthened, and it's in comfortableness and comfort that we're so dangerous, in such a danger of drifting into complacency, and that's where perhaps more of us are today.

Sadly, these Christians have drifted, and the writer urges them in verse 35, do not therefore abandon that confidence of yours, it brings a great reward. The confidence that we saw in the previous passage to enter the most holy place by means of the death of Jesus, now they're in danger of giving up that confidence, of shying away as though they've come to the door of heaven, so to speak, their hands about to touch the handle and open it, confident because of Jesus' death, and now they're drifting away.

They've almost got to the end, 1,200 pages into a 1,400 page book or whatever, and now they're shrinking back or shying away, losing their confidence of entering into God's presence.

The writer goes on in the next verse to say, you need endurance so that when you've done the will of God you may receive what is promised. That is, the promised rest or inheritance, our heavenly

eternity is not there for those who start well, it's there for those who finish well.

[24 : 35] And these Christians have started very well in the face of adversity, suffering and persecution, but now they're in the danger of giving up. The warning's clear to us.

Some of you have been Christians twice as long as I've lived. You're in danger of drifting away as I am in danger of drifting away. We may have been Christians for 50, 60, 70 years, and yet finishing well is what in the end matters.

Finishing well that our last gasp will be a gasp of faith. One of the great dangers I think is that modern Christians, Western, in the West especially, have lost the eager anticipation of Jesus' return.

The writer uses this as another form of motivation to persevere in verse 37. In a very little while the one who is coming will come and will not delay. He's expecting the return of Jesus imminently. 2,000 years later we should have the same expectation. We shouldn't have, as probably most of us do, no expectation that he'll come in our lifetime. But the expectation of Jesus' return, which sadly seems to be so underplayed in modern Western Christianity, ought to be a motivating force in our life each day to persevere in Christian faith.

[26 : 01] So often you see in our comfort, in our complacency in the West where we don't face such obvious persecution, although perhaps in the next few years that may well grow, the attractions of our world consume us, distract us and we drift away from the Christian faith of our early years.

The writer here quotes the prophet Habakkuk from the passage that Carol preached on last Sunday morning. Habakkuk was a prophet in the Old Testament in the 7th century BC at a time when the people of God were suffering the opposition of the Babylonians and the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

And Habakkuk the prophet was crying out to God, asking God to come urgently to answer prayers, to reverse the situation and vindicate the people of God and God's answer to Habakkuk the prophet was endure and be patient and trust my word.

And that's what the writer here quotes. And it's not just the words that matter but the context because the context is the same. Here are Christians in danger of giving up on God and they're being exhorted as Habakkuk was centuries before, don't give up on God, be patient, endure, have faith.

Faith in God's word. And the writer will go on as we'll see next week in chapter 11 to recount to us and elaborate for us the nature of what sort of faith we are to live with day by day as we await Jesus' return and our entry into heaven.

[27 : 23] He says in verse 37, in a little while the one who's coming will come and will not delay but my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back, who abandons the confidence that Jesus' death has in fact given us.

But he says by way of encouragement to finish, we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost but among those who have faith and so are saved. come on, he's saying, don't abandon your faith, don't drift away, don't become dull of understanding, don't fail to achieve the heavenly rest, don't drift into willful and persistent sin but have faith so that you arrive at that heavenly rest and thus are saved.

It is easy, all too easy for us as Christians, especially in modern Western society, for our faith to wane and lose its zeal, to become trapped and ensnared by the attractions of our world and its values, to become weary of following Jesus day by day, to be disheartened by church, discouraged by prayer, to be disappointed in our secular world, to be complacent at the grace that Jesus gives us and that God lavishes on us.

But my friends, this is a stern warning to us. Drifting is dangerous and it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Amen. the heart is grateful that the you are even ??

[29 : 27] making interactions and acting changes to the presence in the direction of the sekarang picture to fear