

Don't Shrink Back!

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[0 : 00] Now, I remember many years ago when I was, I think about seven, that's a long time ago, being chosen to be part of a storytelling contest at school.

I must have been, I think, year two or primary two. And here I was given the chance to get up in front of the whole school to tell a short story. The story I chose was The Three Billy Goats Gruff. Have you heard that one? It's a fairy tale, probably not very fashionable nowadays, but it was a fairy tale which talked about the three goats and how they got across the bridge and there was a troll under the bridge that was stopping them.

Anyway, things went smoothly. The rehearsals were, you know, fantastic. I was standing on stage with great confidence, telling the story with gusto. It was all coming rather easily.

I memorized those lines, well delivered. I even had a few dramatic actions. You know, like when the final Billy Goat Gruff rams down the troll. Kapow! You know, I had that perfect timing.

[1 : 03] Sends him packing forever. Now, all this was in front. Well, it was actually in an empty school hall, of course, the rehearsals. And when the morning of the assembly finally arrived, and I saw all my fellow students in the hall, I had the biggest stage fright ever.

And so as my name was being called to come on stage, I fled. I ran as far as my tiny legs could take me. So if this church here was the school hall, I think I would have run as far as the Price's house, or maybe even to Helen's house.

That's how far it was. And such was my fright. I can't, you know, I can't to this day recall what happened next. Did my classmates laugh at me? Did the teacher come find me?

I can't remember a thing. But somehow, and I've, you know, this incident has been so, you know, pushed so far into my memory that I don't think my wife and my two girls know about the story until today.

But somehow this incident came flooding back to my mind as I was thinking about this week's sermon. Because if you ask me, this was my personal experience of what it means to shrink back.

[2 : 17] All my hard work had come to nothing. What was supposed to be my time in the sun came to nothing. Because I had chickened out. I had shrunk back.

And, you know, I keep thinking what could have been if I had gone through with it. Perhaps I'll be famous now. The host of play school, Giggle and Hoot.

But alas, that's just a dream. And all because I shrunk back. Now, maybe that was never going to happen anyway. That dream about being the host of play school.

But tonight, we're going to find, and we're going to look at something that will be true for me and for you. And that is our eternal glory and salvation. And we will see how serious it is to actually shrink back from that.

It's actually spelled out for us right at the end in verse 39. But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.

[3 : 21] And in the lead up to that verse, we're given three reasons why we shouldn't shrink back. And now as we work through each of them, I want to pose this question to you. Do you think you're someone who's at risk of shrinking back?

And if so, what might be the likely cause of it? Do you think you're someone who's at risk of shrinking back? And if so, what's the likely cause of it?

I have those couple of questions at the back of your mind, will you, as we look at the passage tonight. So to our first point, we're in verse 19 to 25. We're urged not to shrink back because of what Christ has done for us.

Here we have another summary of what we looked at over the last few weeks. In fact, it's a mirror of our opening verses in chapter 4. Remember, that's the start of the section that we've been looking

at until now.

So consider verse 14 of chapter 4, which I put on the slide. And then verse 16.

[4 : 28] And in the chapters in between, we've seen how Jesus is the perfect sacrifice, the perfect high priest who's done everything to give us access to God.

And so that's why today's passage begins with the words, Therefore, verse 19. Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way open for us through the curtain that is his body, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

You see, everything has been done for us because Jesus as high priest with his sacrifice has brought us to the very threshold of the most high place, most holy place.

The curtain which separated us from God is now open and we only have to step in by faith to receive this wonderful gift from God, the ability to come into his presence boldly with confidence. Now, the references there to our body washed with pure water, I don't think it's a reference to water baptism, as some think, but rather, together with the other phrases like through the curtain and hearts being sprinkled, all point back to what the high priest had to do on the day of atonement.

[6 : 08] So, if you were here a few weeks ago, remember when we read Leviticus chapter 16, all these rituals that the high priest had to do, bathing himself, sprinkling blood on the altar, in order to enter the most holy place.

This is just the writer's way of mirroring what was being done on the day of atonement. But for the high priest then, it was only once a year, and only by himself that he could enter.

Now, however, a new and living way has been opened for all of us by Jesus on the cross. Hence, we have the reference to his blood in verse 19 and his body in verse 20.

We can all now do what only the high priest could. Only this time, we're truly entering God's presence. It's not a shadow, as I've said in the past few weeks.

And we can do it all the time with great confidence. How amazing is that? And therefore, now that we're at heaven's door, as it were, the plea is not to shrink back.

[7 : 18] Rather, we're given three ways to respond to what Christ has done for us. The first, we've already seen in verse 22, we're to draw near to God with a sincere heart by faith. And so I say to those of you here who haven't done this, let me urge you to put your trust in Jesus.

He's the only way to God because only his sacrifice can truly cleanse our guilty conscience.

Second, in verse 23, we're to hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

Having believed in Jesus, we're to hold on to the hope that springs from that faith. God has promised us eternal salvation and rest. And these he will fulfill because God is faithful.

Everything he's promised, we've seen in the Old Testament, has now been fulfilled in Christ. And so what he promises about our eternal salvation, he will also fulfill.

And so even if our life of faith brings trials and temptations, which the Bible says is normal, we mustn't allow ourselves to be drawn away.

[8 : 29] Other things or people in this life may promise an easier life for us or the lure of influence and status in this world. But if that means being less committed to our faith or spending less time with God and his people, which it often does by implication, then the writer is saying we must not be tempted to let go of our hope in Jesus.

You see, the image of holding on is actually to like grab hold of something tightly with both hands. It's like being caught up in a flood or tsunami and you know you're just about being washed out to sea and then you manage to grab hold of a tree, maybe a low-hanging branch.

And so you're holding on for your dear life, aren't you, with both hands. And then suddenly, you see within your reach a bag stash full of \$100 bills just somehow floating.

It's open, you can see it's money in there. Would you be tempted to reach out even with just one hand to grab hold of it? After all, it'd come in pretty handy, wouldn't it, after this flood thing is over? You know, maybe your house is gone and you need to build a new one. But that's foolish, isn't it? Because if you hang on to the tree, even with one hand, you are likely to be swept away, wouldn't you?

[9 : 55] Clutching that money bag as you're drowning. Yes, I've got a millionaire now, but you're dead. It's silly, right? And so holding on unswervingly, it says, is to do just that.

Don't be tempted even to let go. Don't shrink back or you'll be swept away. And then we're given a third way to respond because the writer sees how challenging it can be to do it by herself.

So verse 24, let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day approaching, as you see the Lord returning, which we'll get to in a little while later.

Now often when people think what's, when people read these verses, they think what's important here is the meeting together, that bit. You might even hear us pastors always asking you why you're not at church.

And so you think all that matters is I just need to turn up to church. That's what meeting together is. But if you look carefully at the verses, you'll see that there's more to it than that, right? Because what really matters isn't just the meeting together, but the spurring each other on with love and good deeds when we do.

[11 : 12] And so if all we do when we get to church is talk about where we'll eat after church, Hong Kong dining, not much to talk about, or about how great our footy tipping has been for that week, then we're not really making the most of meeting together, are we?

And it's fine to talk about footy and food and all these other things, but actually, we must also aim to be spurring one another on. And so when we get to church, it's okay to admit we've had a tough week living out our faith so that others can pray for us and spur us on.

It's okay to express our doubts and frustrations with faith, with God even, so that others can encourage us to hold on and not let go. And I have to say it's been really encouraging to see some of you do just that, including using modern technology like WhatsApp and Facebook.

So I see many of you posting prayer needs in your growth groups, sending Bible verses to each other, even links to encouraging articles on Facebook. That's great.

Keep doing that. Use modern technology to help us. That's fine. But let me also add that actually there's no substitute for meeting together physically either.

[12 : 32] You know, just ask two lovers who live in different cities or even go to two different churches like Hannah and Ricky. You know, and they have to depend on Skype to see each other every night.

Don't you think that they will stop all that just to be together physically? Hannah? Yes? Of course they would. And I would.

And I did just that when I was, you know, 20 odd years ago or whatever. Now I get to see my wife every day. That's fantastic. And that's the same for all of us as a church. There's something irreplaceable about being together to pray, to hear God's word, and to encourage each other.

And technology is no substitute. That's why the writer says here we are to make a habit out of it. Make a habit out of it just like eating and sleeping.

It means it's so much a part of your life that you don't need to change your routines to make it happen. So Sunday, 5 p.m. each week, you're at church.

[13 : 36] And everyone in your life knows that. Same with growth groups, whenever that is. It becomes a non-negotiable in your week, which you're protective over.

Now I know some of you work shift and, you know, that can't be helped. But then make it a habit to be at another service or even another church on a Sunday.

And do that even when you're overseas on holiday. Try and find a church to visit on a Sunday. Now we may not see the full value of this, but when we make something a habit, then it actually stands us in good stead during the tough times.

Because when things get tough, and for some of you later on you have children and all that kind of stuff, you go through rough patches in life, you know, there may come a time where you don't really feel like coming to church or it takes a lot of effort just to get ready to get to church.

But if meeting God's people is already a habit for you by that time, then that habit will bring you here and it will help you to help see you through those tough times.

[14 : 46] And it will allow people to come alongside you even when you don't feel like it to spur you on and keep you from shrinking back. Well, let's move on now to the next section, verses 26 to 31, where we go from the positive to the negative or the warning that the consequence of shrinking

back is actually very dire.

So the second motivation we have for not shrinking back is to realize who it is that we are rejecting when we do so. You see, it's God Himself who has given us the very best.

And so verse 26 says, if we deliberately keep on sinning after we've received the knowledge of the truth, and here I think the sinning means that of shrinking back or remaining in a state of unbelief, then there is no sacrifice of sins left.

Because, think about it, what more could be done by God or by you? I mean, do you think, for instance, that if you rejected Christ that you would offer your own life or achievements as the sacrifice?

Do you think that's better? Or do you think God would send someone else, someone better than Jesus? There's no one, is there? If we reject the best that God's offered, then nothing is left, is there?

[16:10] Nothing except, verse 27, a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. God. And if ever you doubt the fearfulness of God's judgment, then simply cast your mind back to the Old Testament.

One example was in our Old Testament reading tonight. You know, the context was that of the spies, but actually, the bigger context was God had rescued his people from Egypt, led them across the Red Sea.

They had seen miracle after miracle in the desert, even the defeat of mighty nations by God. God had done all that for them, and they're now on the verge of the promised land.

They even see the abundance of the promised land. Remember that verse? I really love it, where the bunch of grapes was so huge it had to be carried by two men on a pole.

I've got a little picture of it there. Do I, Emma? And yet, having seen all that, what do they do? They shrink back. They say, we want to go back to Egypt.

[17:20] And therefore, God destroyed them, didn't they? Except for Caleb and Joshua and the young ones. Everyone else died in the desert. Well, here in verse 28, we're given another example.

Anyone who rejects the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. And Jesus, we know, is greater than Moses. We saw that in chapter 3.

So, if this is what happened to those who rejected Moses, then, going on, how much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated us as an unholy thing, the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace.

For we know Him who said, it is mine to avenge, I will repay it. And again, the Lord will judge His people. It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

If we shrink back from trusting in Jesus, then we've rejected someone far greater than Moses. But not only that, we've rejected the one who sent Him, God Himself, and we've insulted the Spirit of grace.

[18:32] God, the mighty creator of the universe, who has been gracious to us, pitiful sinners, and kind enough to give us privileges we don't deserve, and yet we dare to insult His generosity.

Then, God's judgment really is the only appropriate response, isn't it? Or do we expect God to beg us to receive His gift? No.

Now, all this, I think the writer is saying hypothetically, and I'm saying all this to you hypothetically, not that we've done this, but this is where we will end up if we keep persisting in the sin of shrinking back.

Likewise, when people are in the process of shrinking back today, I think what they fail to do is to look up and see who the giver is.

Instead, I think when people shrink back, what they do is that they're looking down in the palm of their hands to what they think they've been given, their present circumstances, and they're sort of bemoaning what they've been given.

[19:44] They're not looking up to the giver, they're looking down at this gift that has with it persecution, suffering, and then they're looking around at other people's hands, and then they become envious that somehow they seem to have it easier than I do or we do.

They say, if God is blessing me, why am I suffering? Why am I not as successful as the other person or more popular or whatever? But the writer says they're actually looking at the wrong things, aren't they?

Because the comparison, it shouldn't be between what I have and what they have. Instead, the comparison is the difference between holding fast, even if they're suffering, and shrinking back. With the one, even though they're suffering, there's also God's riches. But with the other, there'll be God's judgment, a judgment which is far worse than any suffering which we may endure today. And so amazingly, the Christians that the writer of Hebrews was writing to actually understood this. They understood this earlier in their lives. So that's what we read now in verse 32.

[20 : 54] Remember those earlier days. After you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict, full of suffering, sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution.

At other times, you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.

It's quite an amazing testimony, isn't it? Because even as they were young Christians, they could actually understand this value proposition. So much so that they were willing to suffer publicly, the insults.

Perhaps they were put on trial and mocked. And then not only that, when others were so treated, they stood side by side with them as well. And look how they responded when their property was confiscated.

It's an amazing response, is it? They accepted it with joy. They gladly accepted it. But they weren't crazy. No, they actually realized that they had better and more lasting possessions.

[22 : 03] See that value proposition there? What they had was worth more than the suffering they're going through right now. Friends, we mustn't assume that these things are things in the past, that it only happened when they were pagan Roman emperors because there have been more martyrs, Christian martyrs, in the last century than in actually all the centuries put together since Jesus.

And today, many of our brothers and sisters in the world live under some form of persecution. Go to Africa, the Middle East, and even in China. This is not a past occurrence.

It's a today occurrence. And increasingly for us in the West, we too are going to experience this, aren't we? Increasingly, those who hold to the teachings of the Bible, especially around sexuality, will be mocked and ridiculed.

And I know some of you have been teased at school for being a Christian or have pressure put on you by maybe your parents as well for being a Christian. These things are normal, actually, as a Christian.

And our natural response is actually fear. We try and fight to get out of it, isn't it? Or as a church, you know, we try and preserve things the way they were when society actually respected Christians.

[23 : 27] But just look at those Christians then. That's not how they responded, did they? Rather, they welcomed the persecution with joy. And so I have to put it to you that actually for us as a church, persecution is not necessarily bad for us because it helps us to clarify our hope.

It makes our heavenly possessions so much more attractive that we hang on tightly to that hope and not shrink back. And so as a final encouragement, the writer gives us the third reason for not shrinking back and that's because we will soon be rewarded.

Back in verse 25, back in 25, we're encouraged to know that the day is approaching. Well, now he keeps going with that theme. We urge not to throw away our confidence even in the midst of trials because verse 35, it will be richly rewarded.

You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. And this is coming sooner than we think, the writer says, because in just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay.

And when he does, God's pleasure will be with those who live by faith. Conversely, God says, I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back.

[24 : 48] They will be destroyed but those who continue in faith will be saved. And so, brothers and sisters, by way of conclusion, let me return to that question posed to you at the start.

What might be your greatest risk when it comes to shrinking back? What do you think you're most susceptible to? Is it the risk of not holding on unswervingly because you've got one hand on God's promises and then the other, you're just trying to get all the other false promises of this world? Or is yours the habit of not meeting together? Is church for you an optional extra and you sort of turn up when you make it, you feel like it? or do you depend on coming to church to spur yourself on

to love and good deeds?

Or is your risk that of always comparing yourself and your situation with others and wondering why you're missing out as a Christian instead of looking up at God as the giver and see what he's given, that what he's given to you is best in Christ?

Well, I think I'm going to give you all a bit of time to reflect on that. Think about what might be the risk for you unless you think, of course, that there is no risk of you shrinking back.

[26 : 11] I know that for some of you young ones, 70 or 80 more years lie ahead of you as far as your faith is concerned. And that might seem like a long time but compared to eternity, that's nothing, is it?

He who is coming will come and will not delay. That is, God will not allow his church to suffer any longer than is required. So friends, let's not shrink back but live by faith.

Let's hold on with both hands to the hope we profess because he who promised is faithful. But I'm going to give you a minute now to just reflect on that risk to pray and then I'll close in prayer.

Father, we thank you for that great gift of Christ's work for us on the cross so that we have come to the very presence of God back and to draw near to him by the blood of Jesus.

Help us to see this for the great and wonderful gift that it is. Help us to see that it is not to be thrown away lightly.

[27 : 22] Father, give us strength in times of trial even as we see the days coming with more persecution and more testing.

Help us to hold unswervingly to the hope that we profess because what you've promised will come true because you are a faithful God.

We pray and ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. That was wonderful.

I love life.