

The Other Side of This Struggle Hebrews 12:18-29

We are wrapping up our fall sermon series today, which is Living by Faith in Troubling Times, and let's begin by reading/reciting our memory verses: Hebrews 10:32-39: *"But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, ³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. ³⁷ For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; ³⁸ but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." ³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls."*

Today the author of Hebrews is going to show us what's waiting for us on the other side of this struggle and why it's worth it to stay in the fight and not give up. When you're facing something troubling in life, and you feel pressure, pain and danger, sometimes you have the option to bail out of the situation you're in. Sometimes there's another option that looks easier and more appealing and you have to decide whether or not you're going to jump ship.

I was thinking back to the situation we were in in March of 2020. There was this mysterious virus known as COVID-19 that was spreading around the world. People were getting sick and dying and all kinds of drastic things were happening very quickly. Life changed dramatically as things started shutting down and people went into isolation. There was a lot of fear and uncertainty and one of the things that was affected was the stock market. If you had money in the stock market you probably know what happened. (Picture)

According to an article by National Public Radio, between Feb. 12 and March 23 (a period of about 6 weeks), the Dow lost a stunning 37% of its value. On March 16 alone, it plummeted nearly 3,000 points and lost almost 13% in just one day. Investors were fearing the possibility of economic collapse, so they

ended up selling off a record number of shares. They had the opportunity to bail out of their situation and they took it. They decided it was better to cut and run than to stick it out and see what happened.

We have that option when it comes to living by faith. When troubling things come up in our lives, especially pressure and persecution that we've been talking about, we have the option to bail out and jump on the road that's easy and more appealing. There are going to be times in our lives when we face the decision: "Am I going to keep living by faith in Christ even though it means suffering and loss, or am I going to cut ties and take the easier road?"

That's the choice the people were facing in the book of Hebrews, and today we'll see what the author tells them about why they should choose the road of faith even though it will be difficult, dangerous, and painful at times. He is going to describe what's waiting for them, and us, on the other side of this struggle and why we should never jump ship and take the easier road.

For the benefit of his Jewish readers, he begins by giving a contrast that they would have understood. I think he wanted to remind them of what their forefathers experienced when they encountered the glory of God on Mt. Sinai, so they could see how drastically different and wonderful it would be for them when they encountered the glory of God after enduring and living by faith throughout this life.

Hebrews 12:18-21

¹⁸ For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."

This describes what happened on Mt. Sinai when the glory of the Lord descended on the mountain as the covenant was being established. Exodus 19:16-20 says, "*On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the*

mountain. ¹⁸ Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. ¹⁹ And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. ²⁰ The Lord came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.” (Cf. Ex. 20:18-21)

For those Israelites, it was terrifying to encounter the glory of God. Even though his presence was high up on the mountain, they were trembling with fear. It was the equivalent of a furious natural disaster and deadly forest fire all at the same time. Even their great leader Moses was terrified. They were a sinful people who at that time had no covering over their sin, no forgiveness, no atonement, and they were encountering the holy God of heaven.

So the author of Hebrews wanted to remind his readers of that. That’s what it’s like to encounter God without Jesus. That’s what it would be like when they died if they bailed out on Christ and chose the road that was easier and more appealing in this life.

But then he continues by describing what it would be like for them if they endured. Because of the priestly ministry of Jesus Christ, in his life, death, and resurrection, the author assures the readers that if they endured in faith in Christ they would not experience what their forefathers experienced. They would experience something much, much different...

Hebrews 12:22-24

²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

So he gives them a vision of heaven, which is Mount Zion, and the city of the living God. This is what was waiting for them on the other side of the struggle. No trembling and fear, but incredible joy and celebration and blessing instead. And we need to break this down a little.

First he says, “there would be innumerable angels in festal gathering.” John actually saw this and wrote about it in Revelation 5:11-12: “*Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands,* ¹² *saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”* These angels are engaged in joyful celebration in heaven.

Second, there would be “*the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.*” This includes all who follow Jesus Christ, who like the firstborn of Israel, have been consecrated to God. Not only will there be angels rejoicing in heaven, but people as well. In Revelation 7:9-12 John says, “*After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,* ¹⁰ *and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”* ¹¹ *And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,* ¹² *saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”*

The author of Hebrews continues, telling his readers that they would come “*to God, the judge of all.*” This is God the Father, seated on his glorious throne. Revelation 4:2-6 says, “*behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.* ³ *And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald...* ⁵ *From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God,* ⁶ *and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.”* In heaven there will be awe and worship rather than terror and fear.

They would also come to “*the spirits of the righteous made perfect,*” which refers to those who were faithful to God in the Old Testament – before Jesus came. We just looked at many of their examples in Hebrews 11 – the great cloud of witnesses. Imagine what it will be like to join with Noah, Abraham,

Moses, Elijah, Samson, David, and all the men and women of faith in the great assembly in heaven!

And finally, the author says they would come to “*Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*” Imagine what it will be like to see Jesus, the Lamb of God who was slain for our sins! He is mediator of the new covenant we belong to, he is our faithful High Priest who offered his own blood on the cross as the perfect sacrifice to atone for our sins forever. It was his blood shed on the cross that paid the penalty for our sins and purifies us from all unrighteousness. His blood brings forgiveness, reconciliation, and eternal life to all who trust in him. He is the reason for all the joyful celebration in heaven. He is why followers of Christ and Old Testament saints are even there. When we go to heaven, we go to Jesus our precious Savior.

So the author of Hebrews reminds them of these glorious things to encourage them to endure and keep up the good fight of faith in Christ. Don’t bail out and take the easy road, no matter how difficult the life of faith might be. The struggle won’t last forever and those who endure will be brought into a glorious eternal inheritance. The reward will be worth it and the joy and wonder will go on forever and ever.

Now, to finish this chapter, after showing them the contrast of it will be like for those who endure in faith and those who do not, he gives them a warning...

Hebrews 12:25-29

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. ²⁶At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” ²⁷This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹for our God is a consuming fire.

So he brings them back to remember what happened at Mt. Sinai again and warns them to not be like their forefathers who refused to listen to God's commands and warnings and were destroyed by his wrath in the wilderness. He says, "Do not refuse him who is speaking," and he's talking about how God had been speaking to them through Jesus Christ. This book starts out with Hebrews 1:1-2: "*Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.*" God was speaking to them through Jesus, calling them to trust in him for the forgiveness of sins, but if they refused him, they would meet the same fate as their forefathers in the wilderness.

To give up on Christ and to turn away from him in order to take the road that's easier and more appealing is to refuse God and reject him and his way of salvation. And if the Israelites on Mt. Sinai didn't escape when they refused God's warning from the mountain, how will these readers escape if they reject God's warning from heaven?

Verses 26-27 warns that in the end, God will not only shake the earth, like he did at Sinai, but also the heavens. On that day God will judge all mankind. The kingdoms of this world will all be shaken and the only kingdom that will remain will be the kingdom of his Son. Therefore, they should be grateful they belong to his everlasting kingdom and offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for God is a consuming fire."

And that brings us to the end of this chapter and series. The message is very, very clear – even though trouble will come and there will be danger and pain and loss for those who live by faith in Christ, the struggle will be worth it.

At the beginning I shared about what happened to the stock market in 2020. It was painful and scary for a time but after about 2 months the market began to rebound in an astonishing way. (Picture) By late summer and fall it had fully recovered and there were record highs and by the end of the year, the market was up significantly in most sectors compared to the previous year. Those who chose to weather the storm and face the struggle saw wonderful growth in their investments. But many of those who bailed ended up with big losses. They weren't able to share in the rebound or reward.

On a much bigger scale, the author of Hebrews has helped us see why enduring in faith will be worth it even though at times it may be very, very difficult. On the other side of this struggle is a Savior and an eternal inheritance that will be worth far more than whatever pain we have to go through in this life. And for those who bail out and take the easy road there will only be dread and judgment. So let this vision of heaven and this warning serve well to keep us on the narrow road of faith. Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 7:13-14: *“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”*

By the grace of God and power of the Holy Spirit, may we be people who find the narrow gate and walk the road that leads to life. May we endure in faith to the end for the glory of Christ so that one day, on the other side of this struggle, we will see him and join the celebration that will go on forever and ever in our heavenly home.