

Be Faithful to the Finisher of our Faith

32 But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: 33 partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; 34 for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. 35 Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. (Heb. 10:32-35)

Just a few days ago, the press reported that China has passed a law requiring all religious buildings to fly the Chinese flag as a symbol of solidarity with the communist government. China has thousands of unregistered, underground churches, and this is another attempt to flush them out, or to give the country another reason to criminalise their worship.

Church history shows periods when Christians enjoyed a good deal of freedom, quiet and prosperity, and it shows times when Christians were threatened, harassed, and attacked. Christianity is now global enough that both are happening right now. We live in relative peace, we worship openly, and our Christian faith does not prevent us from getting food on the table, obtaining property, or enjoying the protections and rights of the average citizen.

On the other hand, this very moment, our brothers and sisters in North Korea, Vietnam, Iran, Saudi Arabia, China, to name a few, experience far greater restrictions. Some cannot worship openly on this Lord's Day. Some must hide their homeschooled children from the authorities. Some have crippled their careers by making their beliefs known, and now live in relative poverty. Some face physical attacks from religious mobs. Some face jail sentences, labour camps, and even execution.

We look at those things from a distance, and we pray for them, but it has not yet come to touch us. Whether you worship here or some other place on a Sunday does not place you or your livelihood in jeopardy. Whether you claim that Jesus is to be worshipped or whether you claim that some other god is to be worshipped does not, in South Africa at the present moment, affect your freedom to move about, to speak or write your opinions, to assemble with whomever you want, to buy and sell, to earn, to worship according to conscience, and to raise your children as you see fit.

But I strongly doubt that this will be the case for the next decades. I am about halfway, if the Lord gives me the fourscore, but I don't think the environment that Christianity has lived in in the first half of my life will be the same environment in the second half. Christianity will once again descend into unfavoured status, and experience the restrictions and penalties of a hostile society.

We can already see some ominous signs. Just this year, a law was passed forbidding parents from spanking their children, something which Christian parents believe they are commanded by God to do at certain times. We see laws regarding education being proposed which will make state-control of children's minds mandatory. We see laws being proposed that every "religious practitioner" must be licensed with the government, and that every church must now fall under some government-sponsored umbrella body.

But I think there are two areas that will come to be the spark that ignites real persecution of Christians. The first will be gender and sexuality. Those who do not support homosexuality, endorse gay marriage will soon be called intolerant, bigoted and hateful. You'll be classed with racists and be told to renounce your views or suffer the consequences. The second will be claiming exclusivity for Christ. Saying that Jesus is the true Messiah, the Son of God to whom all people must come and be saved will not be tolerated. You will find yourself

accused of hate-speech and be told to recant your views or face the consequences.

And the question for everyone here, and for the younger people who will live through more of that and face more of it is this: when you are faced with real penalties, real losses, real suffering because of your profession of faith in Christ, will you give up your faith? I don't need to ask our brethren in Yemen, Afghanistan and Sudan. They're facing that now. But I need to ask you that question, you who live in relative peace. There may come a day, when you face, like the original audience of the book of Hebrews faced, real loss for being a believer.

You may believe it will never come. But if the providence of God brings it, you will not avoid it. You may think you'll be able to dodge the controversy. But eventually, the government may force you to sign certain things and register or face prosecution. You may think you'll always have options because of money and wealth. But you need only watch the terrifying newsreels of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust to see wealthy Jewish women being stripped of their fur coats, gold jewellery pulled off hands and wrists and necks and gold extracted from teeth, people of great wealth herded onto trains. Their wealth could not deliver them from that day, and no bribe was large enough to dissuade the demonic hatred of the Nazis. You may think you can always go to another country. But again, look at the newsreels of the St Louis, a ship with 900 Jewish refugees from the Nazis, turned away by Cuba, turned away by the U.S., by Canada, having to return to Europe, and there a quarter of them dying in the death camps. You may go to another country, but the sword may follow you, or that country may be on the same track. In the end, Christ can close a door that no man can open, not the biggest bank account on earth.

Instead of hoping that you will never face that, the right thing to do is to prepare for when you do. Because this is what is at stake: if you make the right choice when you are persecuted, you may lose possessions, freedom, perhaps even your life. But if you make the wrong choice when you are persecuted, you will lose your soul. You will lose the chance of spending eternity – time without end – with God, and will instead spend it in the shameful exile of Gehenna.

The Holy Spirit saw fit to include a book for those facing the choice between Christ and bad consequences. The book is there not only to exhort us to not abandon the faith, but to warn us of the severe and dire consequences for those who do. This book addresses people very much like you and me, who through a process of drift, were in real danger of abandoning the faith.

How does the book do that? Hebrews really has one main idea which is set up in the first four verses of the book.

From there, the writer has two statements which take up the entire book. The first statement takes ten chapters to make. The second statement, though it's interspersed throughout, really takes three chapters to make.

I want to show you that main point of Hebrews and then the two parts, which combine to say, don't abandon Christ, no matter what you are threatened with! Don't fear any earthly loss, for Christ is superior. Children, youth, young marrieds, pay close attention to this book.

I. Hebrews' Point: God's Final Speech

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by *His* Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; 3 who being the brightness of *His* glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. (Heb. 1:1-4)

There you have the main point. The writer begins his book with the word God, assuming and believing His existence, which is what faith does. As he will tell us in chapter 11, faith believes that God is, and that God is a rewarder of those that diligently seek Him. This one and true God, the only God, according to this writer, has been communicating Himself to the world. He is not silent, or hidden. He has revealed Himself.

In the previous age, the previous epoch, God spoke using different methods to speak to those men He chose to communicate to, the prophets. He spoke in a dream to some, He spoke using angels to some, He spoke using the mouth of a donkey to one, He spoke using trance-like immediate communication, He spoke using the Urim and the Thummim, He spoke using the lot, He spoke directly to some, He spoke as the Angel of Yahveh, appearing to some.

But the writer tells us that all that communication, all that speech was partial and incomplete. All of it was pointed towards God's Final Speech, God's Ultimate Communication.

has in these last days spoken to us by *His* Son,

The Son, who appeared to the prophets before His Incarnation, is God's last and ultimate speech. So much so, that the writer classifies the period after the coming of Jesus as the last days. I believe we are living in the last part of the last days, but strictly speaking, the last days began one night in Bethlehem. The coming of Messiah Jesus splits history into the times past when God spoke periodically, and partially, and variously, and the last days when God has spoken finally, and absolutely, and decisively and clearly in Jesus. Jesus is God's Final Word. He is the Finisher of the Faith.

Now the writer is at pains to tell you it is the same faith. The faith revealed to Israel, to Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel. He will keep quoting from that epoch, recorded in the Tanakh, so that we see it is the same God who spoke then.

But what the writer is telling us that Jesus of Nazareth is not just one more of the same. He is not simply the latest thing God has said. No, Jesus the Son is the final and ultimate speech of God. And the writer wants us to know that this is the Son revealed in flesh, the Son made incarnate, the Son who lived in Nazareth, and died and rose again and retains His human nature even now in Heaven. And here in the first four verses, he makes an argument for why the Son is God's final speech, that he will develop for ten chapters.

a) The Son has the Supreme Position

whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds

The Son made everything, and now as the God-Man stands to inherit everything He has made. No angel, or human has that position.

b) The Son is the Supreme Person

3 who being the brightness of *His* glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power

The Son is the manifestation of God's Shekhinah glory. He is identical to God the Father in essence. If you had a dye that would make an imprint in molten metal, you get an identical character from the dye to the metal. The Son and the Father are identical in every way except in how they relate to one another. In the Trinity three Persons completely have the divine nature, but they so indwell each other that they remain one God. That's the Son's person.

c) *The Son Achieved the Supreme Passion*

when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they

With that prologue, the writer has set up the whole book. He says, here is God's final speech to the world: the Son, Jesus the Messiah. He is the continuation and consummation of all God has said before. No one has His position. No one has His person. No one achieved what He did in His passion. It all comes to, and terminates in, the Son.

Now if you want to know how this argument affects whether you will keep owning Christ in times of persecution, turn to John 6.

60 Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard *this*, said, "This is a hard saying; who can understand it?" 61 When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, "Does this offend you? 62 *What* then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before? 63 "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and *they* are life. 64 "But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him. 65 And He said, "Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father." 66 From that *time* many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. 67 Then Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also want to go away?" 68 But Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 "Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Jn. 6:60-69)

Shortly after feeding the 5000, Jesus is teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, and as the people realise that Jesus won't let them use Him as a means, but that He demands they embrace Him as their end, as their life, they give up. They were Jesus-followers for a while. They saw the miracles and even agreed that He must be the Messiah. But once they saw a cost, a cost that would have them kicked out of the synagogue, they gave up following Jesus.

Then Jesus turns to the twelve apostles and gives them the choice: do you also want to turn away? Peter's response is a one-sentence summary of the book of Hebrews: Lord, To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God.

There it is. We believe you are the Son. You are final speech of God, you have the words of eternal life, you are that Word of eternal life. So if we were going to abandon You, the ultimate communication of God, where to from here? Everyone else is less. Everyone else is inferior. All else is a partial expression of God, a partial atonement of sin, a partial message. But You are this in finality, in fullness, in completion. To whom shall we go?

That's what someone says who understands and spiritually imbibes the message of Hebrews. You know that there is no turning back, no turning aside, no parallel path to Jesus Christ. He is the Final Word. To turn back or to turn away from Him, is to turn to damnation. It is to dismiss God's ultimate word. It is to turn your back on the only way of salvation.

There may come a day when your right to work will depend upon you saying, "I don't believe what the Bible says. I formally renounce it." There may come a day when they will threaten to remove your children from you, unless you agree that Jesus is one of many ways. There may come a day when you are confronted with real threats to your livelihood, and comfort, and freedom if you keep confessing Jesus as the only way to God.

And you'll be tempted with a choice: maybe I should accept that Jesus is equally as valid as other gods. Maybe to avoid trouble, I'll adopt a less exclusive Christianity. I'll join a church with one of those oily pastors with cadaverous smiles and infinitely flexible beliefs. Or maybe I should just drop this extreme kind of Christianity, and make it easier on myself and my family. But that's when Hebrews should come at your conscience protesting: to whom will you go? Now that God has given

final speech in His Son? Will you go to Laodicean compromised Christianity?

If you draw back from the Son, you draw back from God's final speech, so you draw back from life. You draw back into perdition, into destruction. And what shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

I hope you never have to make that choice. I wish you nothing but peace and joy in your days. I pray for each of you, and for us, that the authorities would let us live a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness. But it is my duty to present you to Christ shaped and ready to be offered, if necessary. And that's why you must understand the argument of Hebrews. That's why you must sink your mind and affections deep into the reason and argument of this book, so that you are more convinced than ever, to whom shall we go?

How does the writer do that? He does so in two parts.

II. Hebrews' Part One: The Son is the Finisher of the Faith

You can jot down 1:4 to 10:18. For ten chapters, the writer is going to argue that the Son is the Fulfillment, Completion and Finisher of the ancient and true faith, first given to Israel. He is going to make this ten chapter argument in three ways. But these three ways won't seem as persuasive to you in a secular culture, until you understand some background.

During the twentieth century, there was a brilliant historian named Christopher Dawson. Dawson did something which few people dare to do. He sought to map out the history of religion across the world. He studied the religions of Africa, the ancient religions of South and North America, the religions of the Orient, of India, of Oceania. This is what Dawson found, and it is amazing.

Every culture, and every religion, develops some form of three religious figures. One is the prophet, whether he's called that, or a shaman, or a seer, or a witchdoctor. He receives revelation, and communicates divine mysteries. The second is the priest, who mediates between people and the gods with sacrifice, and holy places. The third is the king, in whom or through whom the gods rule, who protects the faith, and upholds the law of the God.

Now it's a remarkable thing on its own, that wherever humans settled, their religions had those three offices. Until the advent of religionless society, people saw the very meaning of life mediated through prophets, priests and kings. For a secular society where religion is placed on the periphery, prophet, priest and king might not seem as immediate to us. I would argue even an atheistic society continues to have its prophets – people who tell others the mysteries of the universe, the priests – people who help make you acceptable and presentable to the universe, and its kings – the people who mediate that rule. They don't call them prophets, priests and kings, they call them scientists, professors, life coaches, and celebrities.

This is part of human nature, part of being made in God's image. We seek prophets to tell us what is, priests to reconcile us, and kings to lead us.

What the writer of Hebrews does is take those three offices, prophet, priest and king, and show in each case how the Incarnate Son, Jesus of Nazareth, is the Final and Ultimate Prophet, Priest and King. The method he employs to do this is the method of comparison. He compares Jesus to the highest and best from the faith of Israel, and shows how Jesus is again superior in position, in person, and in practice.

Jot these down. From 1:4 to 2:18, the writer shows that Jesus is the Final King. He compares Jesus not even to the greatest earthly kings of Israel, David and Solomon. He compares Jesus to the most kingly beings in the universe: the created angels.

From 3:1 to 4:13, the writer shows that Jesus is the final prophet. He compares Jesus to the greatest

prophet, Moses, and his successor, Joshua, and shows that Jesus is the final and ultimate prophet.

From 4:14 to 10:18, the writer shows that Jesus is the final priest. He compares Jesus to the Levitical priests, and shows Jesus has a better covenant and better tabernacle. He compares Jesus to the Aaronic High Priest and shows Jesus comes from a better order, and is sinless, and immortal, and has presented a final and better sacrifice.

Each proof is followed by a warning, a warning not to neglect or take lightly, or drift, or despise, these faith-giving words of life.

Now when that great argument has been made, the writer then turns from doctrine to duty, from the indicative to the imperative, from what is true to what we must do.

II. Hebrews Part Two: Be Faithful to the Finished Faith

Here you can write down 10:19 to 13:25. Even though the writer has been interspersing the previous chapters with warning and exhortations, now in these last three chapters, he drives the point home: if Jesus is the Finisher of the Faith, then you be faithful to the finish. Be faithful to the Finisher of the Faith. Be faithful to this finished faith.

From 10:19-39 Draw near and not draw back.

From 11:1-40, he illustrates drawing near and not drawing back.

From 12:1-29 he speaks on God's training and discipline for enduring in faith.

and in chapter 13:1-25 he exhorts them to live out their faith in practical ways..

Like any good teacher, he expects that practical to rest on a strongly built foundation of the theoretical. He knows that it is wise to take 10 chapters to prove that Jesus is the Finisher, so that the final three chapters of remaining faithful flow out of it.

But here is the thing. The writer knew that among his readers would be those who were only mentally attached to the Christian faith. He knew he had readers who were already drifting, who were dull of hearing, who were disobedient. He knew something they didn't: that when the fire came, it would burn up the faith they thought they had. And not only their beliefs would perish, but so would they.

And so for us today, the fire has not yet come. But like those original readers, we too, can be in danger. We can have a mental attachment to Christianity. We might like playing the game of comparative religion, and feel we've chosen the most correct one. We might really like our church, our people, the way we do things. All of that will not be sufficient to save us.

What will save us is true and living faith in God's Son. A faith that does not simply hear and observe, but a faith that draws near to Christ for His work as prophet, priest and king, and then holds fast to Him. A faith that clings to Him, and says, to whom else can I go? He is God's Final Word!

Let me ask you, have you drawn near to Christ, in true and real spiritual experience? Have you closed with Christ so that you know there is now a covenant between you and Him?

Second, do you know with the eyes of your heart the spiritual realities of the book of Hebrews? That is, while you are in Hebrews, is Hebrews in you? It is when God's Word enters your heart, that you do not sin against Him.

Will you be faithful to the finish to the Finisher of our faith? If the book of Hebrews lives and abides in you, then you will.