

Hebrews 10:19-39: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Hebrews chapter 10 verses 19 to 39. Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places 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 draw near 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 the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the 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.

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 trampled underfoot 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.

[1 : 29] 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, 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.

In the last few chapters, the author of Hebrews has been concerned with the high priesthood and the greater sacrifice of Christ, presenting the heroes of the book with a sermon that now reaches its applicatory punch in the second half of chapter 10.

[2 : 33] A new way into God's presence has been opened up to us by the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. The effectiveness by which this route has been opened up means that we can now enter with an appropriate confidence.

This way did not formally exist. It is now a reality for those who believe. The holy places of which the author is speaking are not just the copy and the shadow that existed in the most holy place in the tabernacle, but the heavenly realities to which they testified.

Our access is by the blood of Jesus, by his self-offering, and by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain. The curtain of the old sanctuary was a veil dividing the first section of the sanctuary from the second, which could only be entered once a year by the high priest on the day of atonement, and then only with blood.

As the author has already written, this anticipates the movement from the old age to the new age that we have entered in Christ. The former situation in the tabernacle testified to the fact that the way had not yet truly been opened.

Many have seen an association between the curtain and Jesus' flesh here. I think it's more likely that verse 20 should be read in closer parallel with verse 19. So entering the holy places corresponds with the way through the curtain, and the instrumentality of the blood of Christ, in verse 19, corresponds with Christ's flesh, in verse 20.

[3 : 56] As in his body and flesh, Christ offered himself for our access to God's presence. The way that we have into God's presence is a new and living one. It was inaugurated and consecrated by Christ's sacrifice.

It is also always new in some sense. It is never going to age, become defunct, or deteriorate. Hebrews has already spoken of the importance of the eternal life of our Melchizedekian high priest. And the same point is significant here. Our access into God's presence is not just through some physical building, but through the eternally enduring person and work of Jesus Christ. Such a living way, a living way established by the eternally living Jesus and the eternal spirit, is best suited to bring us to the living God.

Jesus is a great high priest over the house of God. He is not merely a servant within the house, as Moses was, but the reigning son, the one who is placed over the entire house as its lord.

The access and authority enjoyed by such a person greatly exceeds anything that a mere steward of the house could enjoy. Knowing these things about the way that we have access into God's presence, the appropriate response is to draw near.

[5 : 07] We must do this with a true heart and in full assurance of faith. The true heart contrasts, among other things, with the hardened hearts of the Israelites who fail to enter into God's rest.

The full assurance of faith is the sure confidence in the certainty of the promise of God that will cause us to grasp hold of what he has set before us. The heart sprinkled clean from the evil conscience probably refers to the consciousness of sin that afflicts those under the old covenant, where sins still had not been decisively addressed, also to the uncleanness of their hearts that had not yet been purified.

Behind this, we might hear the new covenant promise of places such as Ezekiel 36, verses 25-27. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you, and I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and give you a heart of flesh.

And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and be careful to obey my rules. The sprinkling of clean water recalls various old covenant rituals, but it's now fulfilled in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

By the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the underlying heart problem of the people of God as a whole is addressed as the Spirit communicates Christ's life, the life of the one faithful one, the one who offered himself as a true and perfect sacrifice of human obedience.

[6 : 41] That life is communicated to us. The body is the means of access, and our bodies are washed with pure water. There is likely some reference to baptism here.

The priest had his body washed in order to enter the service of the sanctuary, as described in Exodus chapter 40 verses 12 to 15. Then you shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and shall wash them with water, and put on Aaron the holy garments, and you shall anoint him and consecrate him, that he may serve me as priest.

You shall bring his sons also and put coats on them, and anoint them, as you anointed their father, that they may serve me as priests, and their anointing shall admit them to a perpetual priesthood throughout their generations.

We have our bodies washed with pure water, as a seal of our access to God's presence. The body is the foundation of the self. Before we ever developed a sense of self, interiority, subjectivity and agency, or a clear will, we are and were bodies.

Our washed bodies assure us that we have true access to God's presence, that we are welcomed as persons into God's house. Our faithful confidence to enter God's presence draws confidence from the faithfulness of the God who called us.

[7 : 57] God has not only promised, but he backed up his promise with an oath, so that there might be no doubt. The author of Hebrews follows his exhortation to hold fast and unwavering the confession of their hope with a second exhortation.

The heroes of the book should also stir each other up to love and good works. They must take an active concern in the spiritual well-being and growth of their brothers and sisters, desiring that they will be encouraged in love and good works, which are the appropriate fruit of a true faith.

A particular concern here is that they are committed to their meeting together. The danger they faced was that of abandoning their duties to each other and abandoning the ministry that other Christians performed towards them.

They would fail to stir other people up to love and good works, and they would neglect the other people who would stir them up to love and good works. The value of meeting together is not just some message from the front, as it were.

It's the constant mutual encouragement that occurs in our fellowships. The neglect of such assemblies seems to have been a real issue among the people to whom the author of Hebrews writes. However, he wants them to feel the urgency of faithfulness at that time.

[9 : 08] The day was drawing near. I suspect by this he is referring not to the final day of judgment, but to a more imminent day of judgment that is nearer in time. The day of judgment that would occur in AD 70, as judgment would come upon the temple and upon the Jews who had rejected Christ in that generation.

His tone at this point shifts. It goes from encouragement to a stern warning. There are those who purposefully turn away from God, who reject all the good gifts that have been given to them, and end up bringing greater judgment upon themselves.

He has already presented similar warnings earlier in the epistle. The contrast between the salvation received by the Israelites under Moses and that received through Christ is an important spur to this. It allows him to make an argument from the lesser to the greater. If rejection of the salvation given through Moses was so significant, how much more so that which is received through Christ?

Intentional, willful, persistent sin after receiving the truth faces serious consequences. We know the reality of the salvation given in Christ, and if we turn our backs upon it, then there remains no hope for us.

[10 : 16] There is no salvation left in the Judaism to which such people could return. Judgment is going to fall upon Jerusalem and its temple. All its efficacy looked forward to the efficacy of a sacrifice that would be offered in Christ.

There is no hope to go back now. All that awaits is literally the fury of fire that will destroy that whole system in a few years' time. Reject the sacrifice of Christ, and there's no other sacrifice towards which you can turn.

There's no other way to get access to God. All that awaits is eternal loss. If there was a death sentence for those who formerly apostatized and rejected Moses' law, how much more for those who reject Christ?

They face that eternal loss. There is no hope for them. There's a threefold description that he gives of what rejecting Christ means. They have trampled underfoot the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of Grace.

Such a person who willfully rejects Christ, even knowing what that salvation means, is someone who tramples Christ underfoot. They profaned the blood of the covenant, by which that new and living way into God's presence was made open for us, treating that blood of Christ, his sacrifice, as a mean or a common thing, something of no value, even though it is the most holy and precious thing of all.

[11 : 38] There is a contrast here between sanctification, that which renders us holy, and profanation, that which despises or holds something up to contempt. Such a devaluation or denigration of the sacrifice of Christ is a deeply serious matter.

Such an apostate is also insulting or outraging the Spirit of Grace, disdainful of the one who communicates the grace of God and the life of Christ to us. This is what the rejection of Christ and his sacrifice will lead to, and the consequences for such a person are of the utmost severity.

The author of Hebrews does not want to give any ground for presumption, while he seeks to spur Christians to a proper confidence in God's promise and the surety of his word, he does not allow them to take confidence just in a once-saved-always-saved position, for instance.

True salvation requires perseverance in the faith, holding on to God's grace and not letting go.

Those who once received God's blessings and abandoned them and reject them and despised them face the devastating prospect of eternal loss.

While some might be tempted to look back to their first start in the faith as a source of presumption, that once they had received the grace of Christ there was never any risk of their losing it, the author of Hebrews wants them to look back in a different way, to look at the start that they made in the faith, to seek to keep up that same spirit that enabled them to face the challenges of persecution and opposition, to recognise how much they valued the hope and the promise that they had been given at that point and not to let go.

[13:16] They had looked forward to a greater reward which enabled them to hold their earthly possessions with an open hand, to be prepared to sacrifice or lose much on account of the much greater gain and reward that they awaited.

They once had that confidence and they should not throw it away. It is invaluable. Don't give up what you began. Recognise those earlier sacrifices and commitments that you made. Follow them through.

Abandon those sacrifices at this point and all that you once suffered will have been in vain. There is a value of looking back here, not to take presumption, but to redouble your commitment.

The salvation of God will surely come, even though it might appear to tarry. Here he quotes Habakkuk chapter 2 verses 2 to 4. And the Lord answered me, Write the vision.

Make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time. It hastens to the end. It will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it.

[14:14] It will surely come. It will not delay. Behold, his soul is puffed up. It is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith. That passage speaks of God's judgment upon the Chaldeans that would occur even if it appeared to take time.

Paul also quotes this in Romans chapter 1. The author of Hebrews here quotes from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which he is using, and he tweaks it in order to strengthen the contrast between living by faith and drawing back.

The wilderness generation were those who drew back, but the people of Christ should be those of faith. Righteousness, proper standing in good relationship with God, is confident faith in the certainty of God's promise.

The author gets his hearers to look back, to look at the start that they made, to look forward to the hope that they await, and to redouble their energies and their commitment, striving to enter into the promise that God has set before them.

The confidence with which they began is of inestimable value. To abandon it at this point would be a tragedy indeed. He is like the coach encouraging the runner on the last leg of the race.

[15:21] Don't give up now. Think of all the sacrifices that you have made. Think of all the things that you are looking forward to as a reward for this victory. Do not let go. Do not give up.

Continue and persevere. Grasp hold of what you are awaiting. It is all so close. There's only a little further to go. At the beginning of chapter 12, he will turn to this language of a race, a race that must be run with endurance, and talks about the witnesses that help us in pursuing this, the great gallery of faith to which he will introduce us in the following chapter.

A question to consider. Can you identify some of the sources of confidence and commitment that the author of Hebrews directs our attention to in this chapter? A question to consider.