**Series: It’s All About Jesus**

**Sermon: Hold On!**

In the background of the book of Hebrews is persecution that had broken out against Christians. In the beginning the Romans were tolerant of this new cult but the Jews were vicious in their attempt to destroy Christian faith. They managed to create riots in Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Philippi causing the Roman authorities to adopt a hostile attitude toward the spread of the Christian Church.

Systematic persecution by the Romans began after A.D. 64 when much of Rome burned and Nero tried to divert public attention from himself as the cause. (BTW Nero didn’t fiddle while Rome burned. Fiddles were not invented until about 1530.)

Nero accused Christians of being incendiaries and it wasn’t long before being a Christian was illegal. Hebrews 11 tells us that many Christians were tortured trying to force them to give up on Jesus but they refused even though denouncing their faith would relieve them of the suffering. They held to the hope of eternal life in Christ.

*Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated. The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.* Hebrews 11:36-38

Let’s try to imagine what they were thinking. I suspect it was something like this:

* Why doesn’t God answer my prayers?
* We are faithful people. We attend worship services. We serve the poor. Why does God allow these evil people to kill us?
* Why doesn’t He destroy them?

Individually they were probably thinking…

* Am I being punished for something?
* Am I not worthy of God’s concern?
* Am I not really a Christian?
* Is God really there?

The book of Hebrews is not an evangelistic text. It was written to people who had already accepted the Gospel. They believed, confessed, were baptized, and were learning to obey all that Jesus taught. It was written to remind them what it means to believe in Jesus, and then encourage and challenge them to hold on through trouble times.

There was real pressure on these church people who were just like us. So he wrote:

* *Pay careful attention to the Gospel. 2:1*
* *Fix your eyes on Jesus*. 3:1
* *Don’t turn away from the living God. 3:12*
* *Be careful not to fall short of reaching Heaven. 4:1*
* *Hold on tightly to the faith we profess*. 4:14
* He warned of the seriousness of being in a fallen state – there is no other way.

The Apostle Paul taught very similar stuff in his letters, and Jesus told us to “*remain in me*”. “*Remain*” implies the possibility of not remaining, of falling away.

* Don’t give up when the going gets tough.
* Don’t quit when you don’t understand.
* Don’t let yourself drift away through perfidy or neglect or by deliberate choice.

If you give up on your faith, what will you turn to? Maybe these Jews would fall back into their ancient faith. It would stop the persecution but it wouldn’t absolve them of their sins. Perhaps they, or we could fall into paganism. We’d be lost in sin but we just live it up for our time on earth.

The author doesn’t try to convince the readers of the truth of the Gospel because they, and we have already accepted it. He wants us to consider that what we have in Jesus is greater than anything else we could turn to and in fact, what we have in Jesus is worth any suffering we may have to endure to gain the promise of God.

We’re not facing the kind of persecution they faced, but we are the pariah class of religious people in our culture. Our views aren’t welcome in public debate. Our feelings and sensitivities don’t matter. Our faith is ridiculed.

I think Christians in America are handling that pressure pretty well. We’re not being tortured and killed, but we still suffer. Suffering for us is when…

* …we have health problems that won’t go away yet God seems frustratingly quiet.
* …we struggle financially. I’m faithful. I even tithe, but I still can barely make ends meet.
* …I try to be a good Christian husband or wife, but it’s not good.

We cry out…

* Where is God is all of this?
* Why doesn’t God answer my prayers?
* Am I being punished for something?
* Am I not worthy of God’s concern?
* Am I not really a Christian?
* Is God really there?

What can possibly keep a believer from falling away when life is like that? When life is unloading on you what motivates you to hold on to your faith? What provides enough incentive that you’re willing to endure suffering without giving up on Jesus?

The writer of Hebrews proposes this. **It’s the hope we have in Jesus that sustains our faith. And that hope is based on the promise of God.**

The author explains his point with Abraham. *When God made His promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for Him to swear by, He swore by Himself, saying, “I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.” And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.* Hebrews 6:13-15

That’s good technique. Abraham was the Father of the Hebrew nation. Ancestry.com traces all Hebrews back to Abraham. They were quite familiar with the stories of Abraham. God called him seemingly out of nowhere saying, *Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you… all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.* Genesis 12:1-3

Abraham, called Abram at that time, believed God and God blessed him as promised although he didn’t get a son for many years. You don’t become a great nation without a son.

Abraham became quite wealthy and helped his nephew Lot become wealthy also. One time several kings divided into two groups and went to war against each other. They didn’t have NetFlix so I guess they were bored. Lot lived in the area of the soon to be infamous Sodom and Gomorrah.

When the battle went the way of the others kings, everybody Lot was aligned with ran away, except for some men who, like dinosaurs got stuck in tar pits. When the winners collected the spoils of war they snatched up Lot and his people and belongings.

Abraham heard about this and got his 318 special forces together for a rescue mission. They won the day and collected spoils from the defeated kings including Lot and his possessions.

It was then that we first met Melchizedek, pronounced Mal-ki-zedek. We’re given very little information about him, not his family, where he came from, how he happened to be a priest of the Most High God. We don’t know of the end of his priesthood.

We’re supposed to see in this that Abraham drew closer to God through Melchizedek with a tribute of a tithe. Melchizedek blessed Abraham. The inferior worshiped through the superior and the superior blessed the inferior.

By accepting the worship Abraham is affirmed to be righteous. Chapter 7 verses 11 and 28 call it “perfection”, τελειωσις. Melchizedek bridged the gap between Abraham and God. The High Priests bridged the gap between the people of Israel and God. Jesus bridges the gap between us and God.

Melchizedek is a model for Jesus through whom we worship God, and like Melchizedek the superior blesses the inferior. The author quotes the Messianic Psalm 110:4, *The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind: “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”*

Jesus is like Melchizedek in that He has no beginning and no end. As Ben said He is a High Priest who mediates between us and God and between God and us. Just as Melchizedek was able to take Abraham into the presence of God, Jesus is able to take us into God’s presence. His act of obeying God, dying on the cross for our sins makes available to us perfection or righteousness.

**The incentive for us to hold on firm until the end is that through Jesus God keeps His promises**. Even if God chooses to leave mountains unmovable; even if He doesn’t save through the fire with His mighty hand, our hope is Him alone.

Now I want to back up to chapter 6.

*Dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case, things that accompany salvation. God is not unjust; He will not forget your work and the love you have shown Him...We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure.* Hebrews 6:9-11

Do you hear the theme we’ve been emphasizing? The author wants his readers to hold on to faith, firm until the end. God has promised eternal life to all who believe. That promise doesn’t mean that we’ll live without suffering. It doesn’t mean the promise will be fulfilled immediately, but it will be fulfilled.

The whole Melchizedek discussion supports the fact that God fulfilled His promise to Abraham even though it took a while and He will fulfill His promise to us, so holding tightly to faith is essential.

You may be wondering about God swearing an oath by Himself in verse 13. I hope you’re asking the same question I am? Why did God need to swear an oath? The answer is simple. It was a cultural thing indicating that His promise is unchangeable and binding.

Let me give you the historical background. Before there were contracts and courts and government oversight, oaths provided special binding force.

The Mishnah that Ben mentioned last week is a collection of explanations of the written law. It’s like all the volumes of law books you see in the lawyers’ offices on TV. The Mishnah describes “nedarim” or oaths built on Biblical principles gleaned from incidents of oath taking. Once an oath was taken it could not be reneged.

* Isaac blessed Jacob thinking he was the older son Esau.
* When Esau discovered that his father had been tricked he was furious and begged Isaac to give him the blessing.
* Isaac said, “*Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing*.” Genesis 27:35
* Even though it was obtained by deceit, it was a binding oath.

Over time certain technicalities were developed so that the security of an oath was dependent upon the strength of what the oath was sworn by. An oath sworn by my mother’s grave was less binding than an oath sworn by the gold in the Temple.

Essentially if you swore an oath with your fingers crossed you could dupe an unsuspecting person. Do you remember doing that as a kid? “*You promised!*” “*Yea, but I had my fingers crossed*.”

Is there any wonder why Jesus taught, “*Let your yes be yes and your no be no!*” Matthew 5:37

To break an oath implied a curse. Often the oath taker would describe a penalty for breaking the oath: “*Be it so to me if I fail*…”

This is why God swore an oath by Himself. The oath established surety of His promise in the mind of Abraham. Beginning with 6:16

*…the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of His purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, He confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged.* Hebrews 6:16-18

Two unchangeable things are the oath and the character of God. By His character it is impossible for God to lie. If He did He wouldn’t be God. And by His oath it is impossible for God to lie.

In Abraham’s case it was about 15 years before the promise was fulfilled. Abraham continued to trust God through the gap between the promise and the fulfillment. The author believes that Abraham’s example of trust will provides encouragement to us that God will keep His promise of salvation. It may be a long while but it is certain. We may suffer as we wait but God’s promise will be fulfilled.

Verse 15 says, Abraham waited patiently. “*Waited patiently*”, μακροθυμεω indicates an emotional investment. It means he held off from getting angry with God about the delay. Ultimately he received his promised son and everything that followed.

The author gave two incentives to encourage his readers to hold firm to the faith until the end. First is that Jesus, our High Priest and mediator takes us into the presence of God. Second, God proved Himself with Abraham that He keeps His promises. Having the promise of victory over sin and eternal life in heaven he encourages, **with everything you have hold on to your faith in the Savior Jesus Christ**.

I know Hebrews is not an exciting book. It’s actually difficult to read because we don’t think like the early Jewish Christians who were facing horrific persecution from the Jewish state and probably at least the beginning of the official Roman persecution.

We’re reading it from our perspective in 2019. We’re not suffering lethal persecution although we do struggle with suffering for which we sometimes get discouraged in faith. We have issues about which we cry out to God for help, be it problems with our health or our finances or our marriages.

We pray for relief trusting God to act. We pray fervently but sometimes we seem to hear only crickets chirping. We start to get desperate. Often we add to our prayers a rehearsal of the things we do in obedience and service:

* *I worship you regularly and faithfully*
* *I tithe*
* *I speak out for you in public*
* *I teach Sunday school or I participate in ministries at church*

In the back of our minds, although never stated is that God sort of owes me one.

The challenge from Hebrews is **with everything you have hold on to your faith in the Savior Jesus Christ**, because if you give up on faith in Christ, what else will you turn to? Is there something else out there that gives comfort from your troubles?

A wise person said to me recently, *Life is full of ups and downs*. This is true for believers and non-believers alike. We have seasons when everything is right in the world and we have seasons when nothing seems right.

Shall we conclude in the downtimes that God has failed? Or that He doesn’t love us? Or that He doesn’t even exist? God has consistently proven Himself trustworthy. We trust Him when all is well. Shall we now not trust Him?

One of the primary purposes of worship is to enter the presence of God, drawing close to Him. In worship we sing songs about trusting God in the darkest times, praising Him even when we can’t **feel** His presence. We sing these to remind ourselves what faith means and to reinforce that we’ve decided to trust Jesus.

If we choose to stop trusting Jesus, who or what else might we turn to? Stephen Hawking? Christopher Hitchens? Buddha?

Will we find comfort in a new philosophy as some do, “*Life stinks, then you die!*” I don’t think so.

Our author wrote, *We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf.* Hebrews 6:19f

Yes, he mixed metaphors. In fact he mixed three, each building on the faithfulness of God:

1. Our faith in Jesus is an anchor for our souls. When life throws everything at us it’s our faith that holds us close to the God who loves us.

You’ve seen video of boats being tossed around by the wind and waves of a hurricane. Lacking a secure anchor those boats are smashed onto the docks or even the shore. Believers who have Jesus have an anchor fastened into the heart of God.

1. Jesus is a forerunner, a scout, like an army scout who goes ahead of the fighting force looking for dangerous areas, ambush points, potential cover for when fighting breaks out, and resources the army could use. Jesus has gone ahead of us to prepare a place for us.
2. Our faith takes us behind the curtain that separates us from God and God from us. We now have direct access to God.

Hebrews pleads with us, don’t break down before you break through. Hold on to your faith trusting God’s unchangeable promise of eternal life. Don’t let your circumstances determine what you are. You’re not a victim. You’re a victor in Christ.

If God is allowing you to suffer He has a reason. You may not see it but He is preparing you for ministry. What you work through today will give you the knowledge to help someone else tomorrow.

He’s making you stronger, perhaps to face other, maybe even greater giants later. I am haunted by the image of 20 Egyptians in orange jump suits knelling on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea with 20 black clad ISIS executioners preparing to cut the heads off the Christians. Those men could have won their freedom by denouncing Jesus but **they would not!**

Whatever you’re going through, don’t give up on Jesus. He doesn’t give up on you.

What do people tend to do when their going through troubles? They stop coming to worship. “*I don’t feel like it right now. Everybody is so joyful and it makes me feel even sadder*.”

A man named Pat who attends Saturday nights, always sitting beside the sound control booth, told me last night that his family has had several deaths recently so he didn’t come to church last week. He said he felt too disheartened. He said, “*I wasn’t going to come tonight but then I realized, this is where I* ***need*** *to be*.”

After church he said, “*I was right. This is where I needed to be. The people here picked me up. I will always be here*.”

When you’re struggling let the body of Christ pick you up. Staying away won’t make you feel better – it will actually drive you farther from Christ.

Allow me to take liberties with what God said through the Apostle Paul:

*neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor ISIS, nor health problems, nor financial problems, not even our sin, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord, if we believe God.* (Romans 8:38f)

Therefore:

*Let us not become discouraged…for at just the right time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.* Galatians 6:9