

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
September 2, 2012

Hold On To Jesus!

Read Hebrews 10:19-31.

Key verses: “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Hurricane Isabel roared ashore near Cape Hatteras, North Carolina in September 2003. Press reports said the storm destroyed the only road giving access to the Cape, home of one of America’s most famous lighthouses. The storm picked up oceanfront houses and moved them across the island. One hotel was moved off its foundations and deposited in the middle of the street. The scene around Cape Hatteras was one of utter devastation. Yet, when the storm has passed, the famous lighthouse remained standing.

That lighthouse provides a picture of what Christ’s followers are to be. We face the daily challenges of life—economic stress, health issues, relational conflicts—that can test our faith. In addition, we live in a culture that is increasingly opposed to the Way of Christ and those who follow the Savior. When the storms of our lives have passed will we remain standing, strong in faith?

The Book of Hebrews is written to followers of Christ facing some unique storms that challenged their faith in Jesus. Among those storms was the growing temptation to leave the Way of Jesus and return to their previous lifestyles which, for this particular group of believers, meant returning to the Old Testament sacrificial system. These were followers of Christ who had converted from Judaism, and now they were being tempted to give up their faith in Christ and return to their old ways.

Verses 26-31 give some sobering warnings against apostasy. These warnings were given to Christians who were tempted to reject Jesus for Judaism. But these verses apply to anyone who, having understood and received Christ’s salvation, willfully turns away from it.

Such warnings are important and should not be ignored. But this text from Hebrews 10 also gives us some wonderful encouragement about how to

stand strong in Jesus when our faith is under attack. We would do well to receive these exhortations for our lives:

1. Draw near to God (v. 22). The strength to stand doesn't come from ourselves but from the grace that comes from an intimate relationship with God through Christ. Verses 19-21 give the basis for that relationship. They remind us that, under the Old Testament sacrificial system, the Holy of Holies in the temple—where God was believed to dwell—was closed off. Only the high priest could enter this holy room and that only once a year. But Jesus' death removed the curtain of separation so that now, through Jesus, every believer can enjoy direct access to God at any time!

The strength to stand comes from being in God's presence and receiving God's grace. So, let us draw near to God.

2. Hold fast to our faith in Jesus (v. 23). The times may be hard. Faith in Christ may be under attack. But this is not the time for giving up; it's time for holding on!

3. Consider how to motivate other believers to stand strong in faith and keep on serving the Lord (v. 24). In the early Methodist movement, believers met together in small groups to motivate one another in these ways. John Wesley, Methodism's founder, had a beautiful phrase for this: Wesley called it "watching over one another in love."

4. Don't give up meeting together with other believers (v. 25a). To illustrate the importance of regular fellowship and worship with other believers, John Ed Mathison shared this: "Have you ever used a pile of charcoal to start a fire for a cookout? Let's say you light one piece of charcoal, but then you pick it up and put it off to the side, by itself. Before long, that piece of charcoal is going to go out, because it can't burn by itself. But if you put fifteen pieces of charcoal together and light them, they keep on burning because they feed each other. They help warm each other" (from Mathison's book, *Treasures of the Transformed Life*).

5. Encourage one another to stand strong in Jesus (v. 25b). Christians need the encouragement we can give each other, encouragement to stand strong when our faith is being tested.

In an article titled "The Loudest Cheers in Heaven," Kay Warren shared the following experience:

Heading home to California...a friend and I passed through the Dallas-Fort Worth airport. On the way to the connecting gate, we heard loud patriotic music playing and saw a group, mostly women, wearing colorful hats, cheering, and waving American flags. The troops were coming home, and here was their welcoming committee.

Two women encouraged us to grab flags and join in. We were early for our next flight, so we took places in the makeshift greeting line. At first, a few soldiers just dribbled by. We whooped and waved our flags furiously. Then the pace picked up as dozens of men and women in uniform came barreling through. We kept repeating: "Welcome home! We're glad you're back! We appreciate you!" Some soldiers wiped away tears, while others displayed huge, self-conscious smiles....

After 45 minutes, it was time to catch our flight. We hugged the organizers and thanked the vets who had come to honor this generation of soldiers. As we sank into our seats for the flight, we felt humbled by participating in this sweet moment of coming home.

It was impossible not to draw the obvious spiritual parallels. These men and women had taken oaths of faithfulness and service. They had fought courageously, lived with deprivation, danger, and disease, and took unbelievable risks, all for the good of our nation.

But as great as America is, it is a temporary place. No nation lives forever. As believers in Christ, we are all soldiers in the Lord's army. We, too, take oaths of fidelity, sacrifice, and service. Our oaths of allegiance are to a kingdom that shall never end—a country where there is never a mistake in leadership, where justice flows down like a river, where poverty, disease, terror, hunger, and greed hold no power.

Scripture teaches us about the welcome and rewards we will receive when our battle on earth is over. Artists, writers, and theologians have all taken stabs at imagining what those moments of heavenly welcome will look like....

That afternoon we were visualizing the very moment when we would step into eternity. As my friend Elizabeth and I looked at each other, the same thought crossed our minds. Through misty eyes, she said, "If I get there first, I'll be on your welcoming committee. I'll be jumping up and down, screaming, 'You made it! I'm so proud of you!'"

I laughed and said, "Oh, you're not going to beat me. I'll be there before you. I'm older. I'll be at the head of the line to greet you!" In that moment, heaven was more real than the smell of the stale coffee in our foam cups.

What I'm really wondering about is this: Will we be surprised at who gets the biggest welcome? I'm not coveting more high-fives, but I am dimly aware of something so profound and holy that I can barely put it into words.

All of us fight unseen battles every day, each believer a secret soldier locked in battle with forces no one else can see. The bravest among us are not necessarily those who fight with guns or tanks. The bravest person you know might be your husband or wife or neighbor or coworker who goes on living one more day when every bone in his or her body says it's no use....

How much could we lighten the load for another just by telling him how brave we think he is? Oh, to be so merciful with fellow soldiers fighting their personal, hidden wars. Best of all, how much better when we bring undisclosed struggles into community, where victories can be celebrated together, great losses mourned together, and where whoops of encouragement can provide even the most weary soldier the courage it takes to keep on keeping on, one more day (www.christianitytoday.com [5-28-09]).
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