
The Present Power of a Future Possession

Hebrews 10:32-39

We have been thinking together about how we ought to stir one another and motivate one another to love and good works. We do so to warn one another about the deceitfulness of sin and the delight of obedience. We study each other and give time and thought and reflection on how we can prod people on to these Biblical objectives.

One of the reasons we need to do this is because the love and good works we are pressing people on to may be sacrificial and costly. It is easy to love people like me who are beautiful, clean and nice people like I am. It will cost me - my pride, self-importance, social standing and possibly even my health - to love all kinds of people. It is a simple fact that our self-serving, soft generation is not producing saints with a sacrificial passion for the gospel and a people who endure as missionaries in the midst horrendous trials. If you think that is not so, when was the last time you risked embarrassment to speak to a neighbor or a lost friend about Christ?

The terrible price that can be paid by God's people expressing sacrificial love in risk-taking deeds is evident in this text. Beloved, we must hear these words in ways that stir us up to concerted action for the gospel to people in the coming months and years. Without this regular encouragement and stirring up we all drift toward apathy and comfort and security. But in a world like ours, love and good works will be costly. Love is not cheap. And good works are sometimes dangerous and costly. One author has posed the question this way, "How do we become a kind of people who break out of apathy and throw off the need for ease and plenty, and risk our possessions and our lives in the cause of love and good deeds?" (Piper)

We have seen how we as a body of people together are to commune with God, cling to our confession of faith and care for one another. These responsibilities are designed to powerfully sustain love and good works in the midst of the danger of willful sin (v.25-31) and now in the danger of personal suffering (v.32-39). We need each other when we are tempted by sin and when we are tested by suffering. Here is the deep reality of God's people in a fallen world - there will be mingled grief and grace. There will be words that confront and words that commend. This is where meeting together to both exhort and encourage is modeled in the text before us. The clarion call here has been to watch out for sin and now to keep on in suffering.

Noting the Excellence of their Past Conduct (v.32-34)

To stir up their commitment to love and good works, our author begins by calling on them to remember what was once true about them. He points to their past as being full of the kind of sacrificial ministry that glorifies God and encourages saints.

³² 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.

Its Characteristics (v.32)

He takes the jewel of this memory from their treasure chest and holds it up for admiration. Their Christian life at that point sparkled brightly with excellence.

It was early in their Christian life - The words here convey that it came upon them after they believed, was connected to the fact of their believing and came soon after they believed.

It was a standing fast - They had a commitment to what was true and how that truth was to be lived regardless of the apparent consequences. They endured.

It was a conflict - Don't let the simplicity of these words fool you into thinking that this conflict was simple and easy. The description that follows shows how terrible a struggle it had become.

It was suffering - It cost them dearly in terms of pain and loss. It was dramatic and difficult, scarring deeply.

When they were young in the Lord, they endured a severe test of suffering.

Its Cost (v.33-34a)

How can we possibly resonate with this text? What was a real memory in their personal experience is dim and distant for us. This simply is not the life we live now. But listen to it and allow yourself to be gripped by what their Christian lives cost them.

Spectacles in public - They were put up for public ridicule and scorn. They were exposed to slander and insults and persecution. There was a very real sense in which they were paraded around for their faith in ways that would cause mortified embarrassment.

Shared with persecuted - They chose to take their stand along with others who were suffering the same fiery trial. They did not turn away, nor ignore them nor leave them to suffer alone. They did not just admire them and honor them from a safe distance. They shared by standing alongside them.

Sympathy to prisoners - Even when it was costly to do so, they went and visited and identified themselves with those believers who were imprisoned for their faith. They identified themselves as being related to these *criminals*.

Seizure of property - Their public testimony and sharing with suffering saints cost them their possessions, their homes, their livelihoods. We do not know whether it was confiscated by the government or seized by others. We only know that it left them physically impoverished and socially outcast.

All of this is to provide the dark background against which to show the bright threads of their response. It is wrapped up in two words: *accept joyfully*. I am struck once again by the importance of joy and gladness to suffering believers. There is a strength of character and quality of faith here.

This was not a grudging, dour, sad suffering. It was joyful. This was being made fun of for being a Christian and connecting yourself publicly with those who were being attacked. This was going to visit imprisoned Christians and coming home to find your windows broken and your furniture stolen and graffiti sprayed on your house, "Christian, get out!" Or it was coming home to a subpoena or a government issued padlock on your door and everything gone. Your response then was not to mainly feel sad or discouraged or angry. Instead, you called your flock group together and sang songs of praise and thanked Jesus for the privilege for suffering for His Name. (Piper) Sufficient grace gladdened a suffering heart.

This however is so incredibly distant from our own experience we can hardly grasp it. That this is not our experience is not due to the happy smile of the world around us on truth proclaiming Christians. Loved ones, the reason this is distant from our experience is that we almost never do anything to incur it! Frankly, most of you will be loathe to leave the comfort of whatever you are doing this afternoon to return for our gathering this evening. And what would happen to us if we began to publicly, house to house, declare that if people did not repent and believe in Jesus alone and turn away from Catholicism as apostate and God-abandoned (the modern equivalent of their Judaism) they would die in their sins and face the wrath of a living God forever? What if we took out a full page ad in a national newspaper under our name and said that every Muslim who did not repent and turn to Jesus Christ in obedient faith would face an angry God and eternal hell? Do you think that we would begin to experience what came upon them?

Now I want to ask you a question that should be reverberating in your mind. How could they accept joyfully all this? Where does this sort of gladness come from? How, for the sake of heaven, does one turn away from valuing and prizing earthly comfort, security and possessions so that the loss of them fuels praise?

Its Cause

(v.34b)

They accepted this with joy because of what they knew! Now understand what he is saying here. They were joyful, not just because they were supposed to be. The idea here is not that they sat around and muttered Christian slogans to one another or manufactured outward expressions that look like joy. Their affections (emotions) responded to this terrible outward experience based on deep inward knowledge and desires. The loss and cost brought joy because they knew:

They had something better

They believed in an obeying way that they had better possessions. The loss of all their earthly goods for the Name of Christ only caused their hearts to turn with rising gladness to treasure and value the things which no earthly means could destroy. They had their treasure in heaven and the earthly loss only loosened happy hearts to run forward to possess it.

They had something lasting

They believed in an obeying way that they had eternal possessions. They understood by faith that all the world tends to grasp for and cling to and clutch at is fleeting,

passing, decaying, rusting, and rotting. They had weighed each thing they owned in the balance of eternity and held fast to that eternal weight of glory with glad abandon.

Their joy came because of what they believed, not how they felt. Joy may be an affection, but it bubbles like a spring in the pool of a heart believing the truth. O, that this were true of us. How I yearn in my own heart to be free from the grasp of material possessions and gripped by the better and eternal possessions that I can just see by faith and hope for in my heart and lean toward in my affections.

Here is how saints of old and now thinking about *knowing*. Here's the key. You must have this confidence. It is the deep confidence about your future. That confidence frees you from fear and greed that kill love. It frees you from being someone who has to have security and safety and ease and comfort. Where does this confidence-this knowing-come from? It comes from Christ. It comes from understanding what He has done in the cross and the resurrection. It rests in what He is doing now for us in heaven, and what He will do for us at the Second Coming. It is totally intrigued by what Christ will go throughout eternity. It is a knowing confidence in Jesus, for all that we ever hope for is ours in Christ. We receive it, not by meriting it or earning it, but by trusting totally in Him. If we love it above all that earth offers, it is ours. So when verse 34 says that the key to rising joy in the face of suffering and earthly loss is *knowing we have a better and lasting possession*, it means that we know this because of Christ. Jesus is the seal and the guarantee of our hope in all the promises of God. Ultimately, Jesus is the better and lasting possession. (Owen, Piper)

Hearing the Exhortation to Future Confidence (v.35-39)

In the light of all this amazing exhibition of gladness in the midst of terrible suffering, what must they be on the alert for? What warning would such a people with such a past need?

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.

Its Caution (v.35)

The author warns them not to throw away their confidence! Stop and think about that. The soul threatening danger that faced them was a temptation to discard the very thing that had made them accept with joy their suffering loss. They were on the verge of throwing away the confidence that came from knowing the future the promises of God would bring.

Now this is an important warning for us as well. All of us who have had some measure of spiritual blessing and experienced the maturing and sustaining enablement of sufficient grace are in great danger of drift. If all we can do at this point is *to remember* the glory days and we have ceased to experience them, we must be sure that something terrible has not happened in our lives. We must be sure that we have not discarded the very confidence in Jesus that fueled joy and glad obedience.

Its Condition***(v.36)***

Look at how this is picked up. What is needed is endurance. What is needed is perseverance. We need a stick-to-it-tiveness that is so often woefully absent. What is not in view here is a stubborn adherence to what has been shown to be wrong or false or in need of change. That is not the perseverance the author has in mind. What is needed is an inner determination to do God's will.

See how this is actually put in the past? What is needed is endurance so that there will be reward and reception of promises *after we have persevered in doing God's will*. This has been a powerful antidote to discouragement and depression in my life. There are many choices and plans that are before me that are open to change. And there are many that are not. They are God's will because they are what the Bible says I must do. And by the grace of God, I am pressing forward with His strength to possess the reward and receive the promises.

And I am afraid for me. As I am for all of us. If we fail and quit and do not endure and find little grace in us for persevering when it is relatively easy now, what will happen to us when we are called on to stand in the face of real, terrible, soul wrenching suffering?

Its Consequence***(v.35b, 36b)***

What motivation does the author use to stir up his readers to love and good works? To persevere in them and not throw away or discard their confidence as a disposable commodity? He motivates them in this way: the reward is sure (v.35b) and the promises will be received (v.36b).

We must not think of these as though they are separate things. Dear ones, the reception of all that God promised to be for us in Christ is our reward. The promises of God and the reward of Jesus are powerful magnets that draw us forward and heavenward in difficult times. Here is the present power of a future possession. It enables glad acceptance and confident endurance in the midst of the great contest. It looks beyond the present exposure to insult and ridicule and opposition in great expectation. It accepts with joy present loss and suffering because it values its heavenly treasure. It reaches out with risk-taking love to share with Christians who suffer. And it sets itself to endure it all for the glory of its author and finisher, Jesus.

Its Content***(v.36-38)***

Where does all this come from? From the Word of God. These verses are a quote from Habakkuk 2:3-4. What we are remembering (v.32-34) and what we must press on towards (v.35-36) is a life of faith. It is a life that listens to the Word of God, believes in an obeying way and pleases God until Jesus comes. The argument of Habakkuk, his complaint and God's response are the answer to the agonizing question raised when these two paragraphs have become our life experience, "Where is God when it all seems to be falling apart?"

Reflect and Respond

What will we lose if we do not hear and heed the call here?

We will little by little no longer really be walking by faith. Our trust in Christ and holding fast to His promises fades slowly away in the press of daily life.

We will lose confidence that Christ's promises are better possessions than all else we actually possess. So in the loss of good things we may well lose the best thing.

We will lose our habit of Biblically gathering to encourage and exhort one another. So the danger escalates from we will respond wrong to suffering to we will deliberately and defiantly go on sinning.

We will lessen our love and lose our ministry to Christian sufferers. We will not risk our homes, our cars, our children to identify with the persecuted. The great, horrible loss is that we will no longer do sacrificial deeds of love.

So the question is: will we embrace this? Will we bank all our future in trust in Jesus? Will we wake up from the trance of this stupefying world and see and believe and rejoice and love? And will we suffer with joy?