

The Perseverance of the Saints – Part I

THE DANGER OF DULL HEARING

Hebrews 5:11-6:8

4-10-88

*Bethlehem Baptist Church
John Piper, pastor
Copyright 1988,1997 John Piper*

I hope to spend the next several weeks on the Biblical doctrine of The Perseverance of the Saints. Let me begin by explaining some of these words for the children. Then I will be sure that most of us have understood what I mean.

What is a doctrine? A doctrine is something the Bible teaches. It's a teaching. So what the Bible teaches about Christ is the doctrine of Christ, and what the Bible teaches about heaven is the doctrine of heaven. So when you hear the word doctrine think "teaching". Bible doctrine is Bible teaching.

Notice, I don't say "Bible doctrines of heaven" or Bible doctrines of Baptism." The Bible does say a lot of different things about heaven and baptism in a lot of different places. And so in that sense there are a lot of different teachings about these topics. But when we say we are going to study the Bible doctrine of heaven or of baptism, we mean that we are going to try to look at all the teachings (or most of them) and then sum them all up in a unified way.

That is why you will only hear doctrinal preaching in churches where the Bible is considered to be an inspired unity. In other words, if I believed that all the different teachings in the Bible disagreed with each other I wouldn't bother trying to preach on "the doctrine" of anything. But I believe the Bible is God's word, and that God is not a God of confusion or contradiction. So what it says on various themes will fit together. And we will be the wiser and deeper for trying to listen to the whole message of the Bible on its important themes.

The word perseverance means endurance or persistence. But even those words may be too big for the kids. Let's use an illustration. What does it take to finish a long race when you are tired? You might say, strength, or a big desire, or trying hard. Well that's what perseverance is. Perseverance is having and big desire to finish something and trying hard and getting strength to do it.

So when you are standing at the roadside at the end of a race and you want to encourage your favorite runner, Patrick, you could holler, "Persevere, Patrick!" But of course everybody would look at you funny, if you said that. So what you should say is "Hang in there, Pat!" It's the same thing. Perseverance means hanging in there. So we are going to talk about the doctrine, or the Biblical teaching, of the hanging in there of the saints.

Now what does the word saints mean? Saints, simply means real Christians. When Paul writes to the church at Philippi, he simply says, "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi." A saint is not a special group of Christians, like martyrs or preachers or missionaries. Saints is just another name for people who are truly born again and who have saving faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

So what we are going to think about for the next several weeks is the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, that is, the Bible teaching of the hanging in there (the endurance and persistence) of people who are true Christians.

The book of Hebrews has more to say about Christian perseverance than any other New Testament book. It is written specifically for a group of Christians who were about to quit hanging in there. Let me walk you through this book to show you what the situation was and how this writer responds to it.

Let's start in chapter 2. What we see here is a signal that the church was starting to drift away from the truth. Verse 1: "We must pay the closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it." They had started to drift with the current of the world instead of rowing upstream toward holiness.

Verses 3 suggests that they were beginning to neglect the greatness of their salvation. "How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?" They were just not paying much attention any more to what it means to be a Christian in the real world. They were drifting and neglecting.

Now chapter 3. Verse 6 suggests that they were losing a grip on their confidence about the future. Verse 6b: "We are his house if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope." "If we hold fast!" So evidently there was danger they were not holding fast to their confidence and hope.

Drifting. Neglecting. Letting slip. This is the opposite of perseverance. The opposite of hanging in there over the long haul.

Verses 12-14 show us again what the danger is. "Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God." Their drifting and neglecting and slipping could result in a falling away from the living God. They are not "taking care" the way they should. So he goes on in verse 13 . . .

"But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Evidently their conversation was only about the world. All they talked about was the Twins and the stock market and problems at the office and at home. They had lost the urgency of exhortation in their daily conversation. Sin was starting to deceive them. And this neglect of God's guidelines was causing them drift and slip and lose their hold on joyful vibrant confidence. And that is terribly dangerous he says in verse 14 . . .

"Because we share in Christ, if we hold our first confidence firm to the end." Hanging in there with confidence is utterly crucial if we hope to finish the race.

Chapter 4 verse 1 says that some in the church are in danger of not finishing the race, not getting to heaven. "While the promise of entering his rest remains, let us fear lest any of you be judged to have failed to reach it." Some had become so negligent and careless in their spiritual walk that they had no godly fear about what was at stake in their daily lives. They were just drifting along with the walkman of the world in their ears feeling secure, while God's messenger was crying out from the shore that the Niagra falls of judgment were approaching.

That's what our text suggests in 5:11, "About this we have much to say which is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. In their drifting and neglect and carelessness their spiritual ears had become dull. The Bible was becoming uninteresting. Their desire for the teaching and preaching of God's word was fading. The energy to think and ask questions about the most important questions in the

world was seeping away. And in its place was a kind of spiritual sluggishness and insensitivity. Things of the world were becoming more exciting and attractive than the word of God the greatness of his salvation.

Chapter 6 verse 1 suggests that this church had lost its zeal to press on in the Christian life to maturity. "Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrines of Christ and go on to maturity." The church was beginning to feel that progress to maturity and growth holiness was optional. It wasn't really necessary in the Christian life. So they were just drifting along on past attainments. And all the while becoming dull in hearing, deceived by sin, and hard in heart.

Chapter 10 verses 23-24 show the same danger. "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." They had the idea that hope was a kind of automatic thing. It just sort of happened to you, and stayed with you. But the writer says, on the contrary, hope has wings and will fly away as soon as you let it go. Keeping hope is a very active thing.

And the same with love and good works. If we drift, we drift away from love. If we are going to be a loving community, we must stir each other up. All our natural tendencies are downstream toward the ocean of selfishness. If we are going to live upstream in the clean, cool waters of hope and love, we must actively hold fast to hope and actively stir each other up to love. Drifting and coasting and inactivity in spiritual things is very dangerous.

It wasn't always this way at this church. Look at 10:32, "But recall the former days when after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings." In other words you were once so fired up about the value of your salvation and God's purpose in the world that you were willing to suffer for it.

But now you are sitting on your easy chair with no zeal for the future and perhaps thinking that those past experiences you had are enough to make you an acceptable Christian. But security does not come like that. Look at verse 35, "Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised."

There it is: You have need of endurance, persistence, perseverance, hanging in there. They are making a big mistake in thinking that they don't need endurance, they don't need to hang in there. But verse 39 makes clear what is at stake: "But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls." In other words we can lose our souls and be destroyed if we begin to go backward and don't press on toward greater faith and holiness. Hanging in there is very important.

Let's look at one more image the writer gives us of what's wrong with this church. Chapter 12:12-13, "Lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed." The race has run on a long time and the Christian runners are tired. So their hands hang down and their knees are wobbly. They are on the brink of being totally incapacitated, if a leg goes completely out of joint.

So now we have a sense of what's wrong with this church.

- They are drifting instead of rowing against the current of sin, and that means drifting backward toward destruction.
- They are neglecting the great salvation they claim to have.

- Their grip on joyful, zealous hope is slipping.
 - Their hearts are hardening to the truth of God's word.
 - Their conversation is losing its spiritual urgency.
 - Their ears are getting dull.
 - They are losing their desire to press on to maturity.
 - They are becoming weak and sluggish.
- And the result of all this is that they are in danger of shrinking back from the beginning they had made, becoming hardened to spiritual things, falling away from the living God, and losing their souls.

The opposite of all this is Perseverance -- hanging in there as a zealous, growing Christian. There are two alternatives for those of us who claim to trust Christ as Savior and Lord. One is to press on toward maturity in knowledge and faith and hope and holiness. The other is to drift slowly into indifference and dullness and, eventually, destruction. And one of the great errors of this church was that they thought there was a halfway point where they could stay as professing Christians, not pressing forward and not drifting backward. But there is no such place. That's the point of this book. Either we press on toward the inheritance or we drift back toward destruction.

Now this overview of the book of Hebrews raises many questions in our minds. If it does not raise questions in your mind it is very likely that you have already grown dull of hearing and are in a serious spiritual condition.

It raises the question whether assurance that I am saved and will get to heaven is possible or even proper. What's the difference between Biblical assurance and false confidence?

It raises the question whether a person who is saved can fall away from God and be destroyed. If so, how can there be any assurance? And if not, why is there all this warning about the danger of falling away from the living God, about shrinking back and being destroyed?

It raises the question whether assurance is the same thing as saving faith? Can you have saving faith and still have ups and downs in your struggle for assurance?

It raises the question about how to get and maintain assurance?

In other words as soon as you focus seriously on the necessity of perseverance, as this book does, the urgent questions that rises is the question of assurance and security. And we know we are thinking Biblically when we raise these questions because not only does the book of Hebrews have more to say about perseverance than any other book, it also has more urgent exhortations to assurance than any other New Testament book. So we know our questions aren't artificial or unwarranted. They are the very ones that the author has on his mind.

So let me close this morning by showing you some of these exhortations to have assurance and confidence.

6:11 - "And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness in realizing the full assurance of hope unto the end."

6:18b - ". . . we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us."

10:22-23 - "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith . . . (23) Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering for he who promised is faithful."

10:35 - "Do not throw away your confidence, which has great reward."

What I want to leave you with this morning is three things:

1. A strong, urgent sense that there is no standing still in the Christian life. Either we are persevering toward greater faith and holiness or we are drifting backward toward hardness and destruction.
2. Just as strong and urgent a sense that this perseverance is to be pursued in a joyful and full assurance of hope that we will inherit the promises because of the faithfulness of God.
3. Some serious questions lingering in your minds about how these things hang together so that you will study this week and come back next Sunday with full of expectancy that God will speak to us and make all things new.

May the Lord take away all dullness from our hearing and give us a sharp and living hunger for the truth of his word.