

<sup>19</sup> Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup> by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, <sup>21</sup> and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful (Heb.10.19-23).

## Introduction

We are spending two weeks on Hebrews 10.23 (**Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful**). Last week we discussed the first part of the text under this title: “A Determined Confession of our Hope.” Having this confession means that we unbendingly appropriate God’s word about the future to our daily lives. The duty to “hold fast” has much packed into it. For short, it conveys the idea of appropriation and it has three ingredients that relate to what we are to confess about God’s word. They are study, conversation, and implementation. Therefore, holding fast to our confession means that we appropriate God’s word in Scripture by study to own it in our hearts as a treasure. It means that we own up to His word in conversation both inside and outside of the church, and it means that we lay hold of it for fruitful Christian living. Per this text, the call is to live in the present in light of the future, live in light of heaven where we now have our citizenship. We are to continue down this path with an unbendingness that is qualified by charity but that is resolute, relentless, and determined with regard to study, conversation, and implementation of God’s holy word to every day life.

We have good reason to do this based on what the pastor gives us earlier in this chapter: we are to do this because of our great high priest, because of His greatness (10.21) and the greatness of His work on our behalf (10.19-20). Nevertheless, we need encouragement, and, for our outline today, there are three things to consider about it: the need, the problem, and the focus of the encouragement before us in Hebrews 10.23b.

### 1A. The need for this encouragement

We can surely affirm that we *always* need a little encouragement; we *all* have our ups and downs as we face “each changing future scene.” We often struggle to gladly trust the future to the Lord. Doing so involves applying the future glory He promises (the not yet of His kingdom) to the present (to the now of life in His kingdom). This brings us to the thrust of our text: how do we hold fast to the confession of our hope in light of the fact that we are weak, frail, and, yes, sinful as His saints (as His holy people!)? In one way of putting it, this duty sounds like it calls for perfection, and we have to wonder about the *imperfection* of our determination. At times, we have zeal to the extreme of being overly zealous. Here, good things lose their goodness because we take them to imbalanced and exaggerated levels. For example, we may be unbendingly obnoxious. At other times, we feel locked into lethargy. I know that I sometimes fall into a state in which I have little (close to zero) desire to get up and go in the things of life and the things of God, knowing full well that the things of life are the things of God. There are times when my “get up and go” has “gotten up and went.” These may be times for emotional, physical, and spiritual rest, but they have to make us wonder about our determination, resolution, and unbendedness with regard to the call to persevere in the study, the conversation, and the fruitful implementation of what we confess.

In this light, there are three points of context that help us deal with our wonderings about our perseverance. First, there is the privilege of drawing near. At bottom, this is prayerful fellowship with God in which we have the privilege to come to Him with confidence knowing that He will give grace to help us grow in holiness. Second, there is the privilege of family one anothering that the pastor accents again in his next “let us” exhortation. We will discuss this privilege next time. Third, there is the rest of the story in 10.23b: hold fast because **he who promised**

is faithful. It is this part of the story that we are concentrating on today. Encouragement for a determined confession of hope is in the last phrase: **for he who promised is faithful** (Heb.10.23b), and we need it; we all need encouragement.

## 2A. The problem of this encouragement

How do we persevere in holding fast to the confession of our hope? How do we do this? How do we have the power to do this unwaveringly (**without wavering**, 10.23a)? The answer from our text is that we persevere because God is faithful. That seems to be a very simple and straightforward answer. But it is profound in its simplicity; it is complicated in its straightforwardness. Understanding becomes difficult once we scratch even a little below the surface.

Here is the problem: some people take this passage and passages like it to mean that the faithfulness of God is a motivation that we may tap into or fail to tap into; so, if we fail to properly value God's faithfulness, we may fail to persevere and we may finally perish in our sins. This is an Arminian interpretation of the book of Hebrews that presents God's faithfulness as a consideration that we are to use in determining our own destiny. That may sound overstated, but we have an influential example that shows that we are not overstating things. His name is Grant Osborne, a popular writer and professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. In his view, Hebrews is describing a very real danger of apostasy that true believers can commit, and if they do so it is an unpardonable sin from which there is no possibility of repentance, but only eternal judgment (*Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, "The Classical Arminian View," 128). It will not surprise us to learn that he feels that his analysis of Hebrews strikes the right balance between God's sovereignty and man's free will.

Let us now state his analysis and then give an analysis of it.

### 1B. Osborne's analysis

We can get a better feel for his position (briefly but fairly) by restricting ourselves to some key questions.

#### 1) How does free will enter the discussion?

He begins his article on perseverance in the book of Hebrews by claiming that his approach reflects the concern to "find the balance between the sovereignty of God and the free will of mankind" (*Four Views* 86). From the start, without explanation, comment, or defense, Osborne lays down the notion of free will as an unshakable plank on which to always keep our feet as we walk through his article. He approaches the warnings in Hebrews with a view of total depravity in which the natural (unregenerate) man has free will (as a side note, his view is more Wesleyan than Arminian; it is Wesleyan Arminianism). His entire approach to the doctrine of perseverance in the book of Hebrews from the ground up and throughout conforms to the premise, the control belief, and the presupposition of free will, beginning with the very first sentence of first paragraph!

#### 2) Where does this free will teaching surface in the book of Hebrews?

There is no mention of "free will" in the book. Osborne is being consistent. The notion of free will governs his understanding of how salvation begins. Thus, with logical consistency this same notion governs his understanding of how salvation continues and ends. In other words, at bottom, we become Christians by our free will and we maintain our Christianity unto eternal life by our free will. He says, "Faith is a passive surrender to the God who saves us, an opening up of ourselves to God, who works salvation in us. But it is still a free choice. This freedom then passes over into the life of sanctification, as the Spirit continues to work in us. But we also decide for ourselves whether to let the Spirit work or live in us. Thus we can...actively repudiate him" [Christ] (Ibid 87). This is conditional perseverance of the saints.

For Osborne, the matter of persevering is on our shoulders in a decisive way. The outcome of our pilgrimage depends, ultimately depends, on how we avail ourselves of the

promises of God who is faithful. His faithfulness is an incentive for us to be faithful, so that by our faithfulness, by faithfully holding our faith fast to the end, we will enter into eternal life instead of eternal death.

In terms of the book of Hebrews, free will plugs into the perseverance texts; they are like good soil for the seeds of free will doctrine to find a home and to flourish. In other words, the “if statements” are conditionals that show the crucial place of our free choice to “let the Spirit work or live in us.” The final analysis is that salvation depends on man’s letting go and letting God save him; it depends ultimately on our free choice to hold firm in faith to maintain our relationship with Christ “to the very end” (100). God does not force this choosing (87); we must be able to do it on our own. We must have the ability to turn away if we are not mere puppets on a divine string. If I am responsible to not repudiate Christ, then I must be able to repudiate Him; otherwise, I would cease to be truly human (this is a variation on Kant’s view of free will: “If I am responsible, then I am able” by which he forced Christian teaching into an autonomy driven philosophical mold. He lived from 1724 to 1804, but his influential book, *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* [1793] gave the myth of free will its modern formulation as Osborne’s claims [2007] show). For Osborne as for Kant, to be a true human being, I must have free will.

Therefore, Osborne indicates that the duty of 10.23 is a conditional in principle like the conditional of 3.14 (99-100; the “musts” of Hebrews are conditionals: we must freely choose to fulfill them by letting the Spirit work in us; the outcome ultimately rests on us). This means that the promise in 10.23b is an incentive that calls us to do what is necessary to determine our salvation. Thus, we know that if we let the Spirit have His way in our lives then we can be sure of salvation because the promise is that if we let Him work, then He will give us an awesome and amazing salvation for all eternity. In this way, sinners receive salvation as true human beings with the dignity of an autonomous and unforced free will.

## 2B. Some analysis of Osborne’s analysis

What is wrong with this Arminian (promise as mere incentive) view?

### 1) The proof is in the pudding

Consider Hebrews 3.14 that is parallel in principle with the duty of 10.23 and it intensifies 10.23 by adding “to the end” (**For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end**). It is difficult to make sense of the view that holding fast to Christ will have the effect of giving us a share in Christ (Osborne’s view, 100). It is difficult because being sharers in Christ is a present blessing, not something to be gained in the future, say, like gaining eternal life instead of eternal death when you die. The pastor to the Hebrews does not say, “you will have a share in Christ in the future.” Instead, he says, “you now have a share in Christ.” What then is the point of the conditional “if” (if you hold fast to Christ)? The point is that if you hold on in faith then you are, in fact, sharers in Christ. It means that holding on fast and firm to the end proves, manifests, and realizes your participation in Christ and His work. His work shows up in the lives of His people: if that is the case, then you share in Christ.

This is confirmed by the context that deals with “some” who may have evil and unbelieving hearts (3.12) that lead to falling away. These are some of the household of faith; some who confess or profess Christian hope. Some may be like most in Israel of old that hardened their hearts in the rebellion in the wilderness (3.7-11). He calls them all brothers or family members but he indicates a level of doubt: are they all brothers who in fact share in Christ? The proof is in the pudding: holding on firm to the end proves the pudding.

### 2) It is persuasion not force

Someone might say, “Health problems, my anemia, forced me to rethink and change my eating habits.” This is not a strong or literal use of the word force. It is not saying “I was coerced or manipulated, non-humanly, by my health problems.” Rather, it speaks of being persuaded and convinced of a better way. This is an answer to the concern of Osborne with “being forced.” Do you know the song about hornets with their stingers that changed unwillingness to willingness?

The sentiment of the song is: God sent the bees and I willingly obeyed. God has many ways to persuade, ways that instruct and teach us obedience. He does not leave us to ourselves. If He did we would wander away in sharp opposition to Him. He must seal our hearts for the courts above; that is the point of Galatians on the flesh lusting against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh (Gal.5.17). Indeed, it is certain that we will persevere by God's doing as the ultimate determining action, not our free choice as ultimate and decisive. This is God's grace.

3) It is a freed will not free will

You will recall that Christ became the incarnate Son so that through death He would set all of His covenant children free from **lifelong slavery** to sin and death (Heb. 2.14-15). Moreover, the blood of Christ purifies the conscience from dead works, from works that arise from being dead in sin (Heb.9.14). To receive deliverance by God's effectual working (by His call, Heb. 9.15; Rom. 8.30) is not to be forced but freed and blessed. Clearly, man in the fall does not have free will, but by the power of God's call into fellowship, His covenant people have freed wills.

Finally, Osborne's view fails by finding too little in 10.23. To that we now turn.

### 3A. The focus of this encouragement

What is missing in these Arminian formulations? What is missing in this picture that presents God's faithfulness as merely an incentive (good as that may be)? We have two answers.

1) Focus on God is missing, the God who promised. In other words, the appeal of our text is to God. We are to find encouragement in Him. *God's* faithfulness is attached to His promise (**he who promised is faithful**). On the mere incentive view, trust is ultimately placed on the self rather than on God. This is so because in the end, man's salvation depends on man; on people letting the Spirit work saving and sanctifying grace in them.

2) Missing also is the promise that faithfulness accents.

The view that God's faithfulness is merely an incentive is contrary to the teaching about sanctification in Hebrews that is rooted in the cross and that is certain and sure forever for God's covenant people. God promised our sanctification in the single offering that has perfected us **for all time** (Heb.10.14). Therefore, we are to persevere in living our confession on the pathway of holiness as the flow of thought from 10-14 to our text (10.23) shows: <sup>14</sup> **For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified...**<sup>19</sup> **Therefore...** <sup>23</sup> **Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.** Perseverance is both a duty (you must hold fast) and a promise (you will hold fast by God's covenant keeping grace). Perseverance has its roots in the eternal covenant in the oneness that obtains between the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified (Heb. 2.11-13) so the language is that of accomplishment. He will remember our sins no more as He promised (Heb.8.12) and He is faithful. He will bring us to the realization of the perfection He secured for us on the cross promising holiness forever. The new covenant promise to remember our sins no more has its roots in the cross where our sins were in fact dealt with once and for all. He makes the promise and He is faithful to His promise.<sup>1</sup>

### Conclusion:

How does it work out in practice? Three points: the circle, the focus and the promise.

1) The circle

There are different aspects to the practical side of the teaching in Hebrews 10.23b. There is motivating truth here; truth that motivates; truth that must be considered and absorbed. That is, to put it plainly for this topic, there is much for us to consider and absorb. The truth is here as bread for our eating and digestion. But then we realize that *we have to appropriate the food to be strong in holding fast in appropriating* God's word of hope. It is important that *we recognize the circle* here and note how the ball gets rolling and keeps rolling. This brings us to the main focus of the text.

2) The focus

The focus is the active, gracious, loving, and unbending power of God who is the covenant keeping God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. On one hand, there is logic to the text: the pastor cites God's promises and faithfulness to them as the basis from which you can draw encouragement by thinking through the implications. But the truth that you are to absorb for encouragement has its focus on God Himself. The focus is on Him and on the fact that He is faithful. He keeps His word of promise. He acts in history to fulfill His covenant purposes.

Therefore, you are to consider, contemplate, recognize, and absorb *God's faithfulness* and that will move you along as a meaningful incentive to holding fast to your confession unwaveringly.

But it is not merely an incentive. If it is merely an incentive then you lose the main point here, which is encouragement by focusing on God's great faithfulness so that God is your hope (and you have a new, better, and living hope). What is here that goes beyond a mere incentive? This brings us to our last comment on the promise.

### 3) The promise

Missing is the fullness of the promise that God faithfully keeps: the promise is that He will apply what Christ already secured on the cross. He will personally, actively, and powerfully sanctify those who He perfected for all time. That is His promise and He is faithful to what He promises. Therefore, the motivating incentive that you are to consider, contemplate, recognize and absorb is that God will keep you on the path of holding fast. His faithfulness under girds your faithfulness and knowing that fact is a powerful incentive that prevents you from looking to yourselves. Instead, it focuses your hope in God: **<sup>22</sup>The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; <sup>23</sup>they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. <sup>24</sup>"The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him"** (Lam.3.23). It drives you to the best encouragement possible: the faithfulness of God. The best encouragement to a determined confession of your hope is to consider, know, and absorb the promise that God will keep you on the path of perseverance all the way to glory.

**May we fall down before the majesty of our God who promises that we will make it to glory because of the work of Jesus Christ our great high priest; by His Spirit may we receive the encouragement of our text and say, "The Lord is my portion...therefore I will hope in Him." To the triune God be all glory for our salvation and sanctification, now and forevermore, amen.**

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<sup>1</sup> God's working in Israel illustrates a divine pedagogy. We should keep this in perspective as we guard against provoking the Lord in the manner Israel did in the wilderness (Heb. 3.7-4.10).

In the biggest picture that covers all of history, the fact that Israel will be saved though under judgment and in remnant form reveals His covenant keeping faithfulness to Abraham and David. The Psalm puts it like this: **Psalm 89:19-36** <sup>19</sup>Of old you spoke in a vision to your godly one, and said: "I have granted help to one who is mighty; I have exalted one chosen from the people. <sup>20</sup>I have found David, my servant; with my holy oil I have anointed him, <sup>21</sup>so that my hand shall be established with him; my arm also shall strengthen him. <sup>22</sup>The enemy shall not outwit him; the wicked shall not humble him. <sup>23</sup>I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him. <sup>24</sup>My faithfulness and my steadfast love shall be with him, and in my name shall his horn be exalted. <sup>25</sup>I will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers. <sup>26</sup>He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation.' <sup>27</sup>And I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth. <sup>28</sup>My steadfast love I will keep for him forever, and my covenant will stand firm for him. <sup>29</sup>I will establish his offspring forever and his throne as the days of the heavens. <sup>30</sup>If his children forsake my law and do not walk according to my rules, <sup>31</sup>if they violate my statutes and do not keep my commandments, <sup>32</sup>then I will punish their transgression with the rod and their iniquity with stripes, <sup>33</sup>but I will not remove from him my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness. <sup>34</sup>I will not violate my covenant or alter the word that went forth from my lips. <sup>35</sup>Once for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David. <sup>36</sup>His offspring shall endure forever, his throne as long as the sun before me.

Note the obvious tension in the passage regarding David's offspring: "I will establish his offspring forever" (89.29), and "if they violate my statutes...then I will punish them" (89.31-32), but "I will not violate my covenant or alter the word that went forth from my lips" (89.34). Accordingly, He promises that "his offspring shall endure forever" (89.36). As it turned out, Israel was stubbornly disobedient. Her history shows cycles of sin, God's judgment, and the gracious saving of a remnant. He has always kept His covenant, even through judgment.

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This working in the nation personifies and illustrates how God saves individual Israelites in the OT, and how He saves individual new Israelites that make up the seed of Abraham from all nations, Jew and Gentile alike. Though we have marks of disobedience all across our histories, in the end we will remain the offspring of Christ, the children God gave to Him before the foundation of the world. We will endure as His children because He has promised and He is faithful in promise keeping.