

By Faith and the Joy Before Us

Proper 15

Pastor Josh Frazee

Heb. 11:17-12:3

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This morning our text comes from the book of Hebrews. Like some of the other epistles that we have, the sermon Hebrews was written to a group of Christians who found themselves under attack over their faith. But while other letters written may only touch on it, the central focus of Hebrews was the recent Jewish converts wondering if they should go back to Judaism.

These Jewish converts thought as many do today: that the path to peace is the path of least resistance. But this is not true. True peace is that peace which our Lord Jesus Christ has earned for us on the cross of Calvary. We currently have that peace, even in the midst of the trials with which we are dealing. That being said, Jesus never promised us a rose garden. In fact, far from it, Jesus promised that He came “to cast fire on the earth.” He asked in our Gospel text, “Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

We do indeed have peace in Christ, but it is the peace which passes all understanding, especially the understanding of this world. This world desires a peace which is only tolerance or permission to persist in sin. Jesus has given you perfect peace. But until He returns, the war continues to rage between God and sin, with us caught up in the middle. That is the very place that the Jewish Christians found themselves in our text. Let’s turn to our text, then, to see what the writer of Hebrews wrote to encourage them, and with which we might also be comforted as we live in this world where that war continues to rage.

Verse 1

The author of Hebrews reminded his hearers of their predecessors in the faith: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and even Rahab. Each of these had had challenges to endure, some even life-threatening. But as they went through the struggles, they were maintained in the faith by the Holy Spirit. We see this over and over as we read the words “By faith.”

Again, some of the recent Jewish converts were wondering: what did I get myself into? Can this really be the right path? But the author of the letter wrote to them what we’ve been hearing over the last few weeks—that Judaism no longer had anything to offer. The Israelites that were the Jews of the Old Testament were given the shadows of the things to come in Christ. They were given the Promised Land on earth, foreshadowing the Promised Land we look forward to, heaven and the new heaven and new earth. They were given circumcision to remind them of the Messiah to come, while we now have baptism, like the one this morning, which points us to the Messiah who has now come and ascended back to heaven, Jesus. Those in the Old Testament only had the shadow of the substance—the substance which came in our Lord and which we still have in Him. There is really no need to go back to Judaism as that would be taking the shadow over the presence of our loving Savior. And further, those Jewish converts would be rejecting Jesus’ free grace by leaving the Christian faith.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is the same for us today. There is no turning to another religion without denying Jesus and losing the free grace He has given you. And look at what you would be turning to: every other religion in the world demands works. Consider what you have heard and learned in the Lutheran church: do your works appease God? Are your works ever enough to pay the price for what you owe through your sin? Because if you turn away from Christ Jesus, you will be expected to do just that—pay for all of your

sin. You will no longer have Jesus' free grace, and as it says elsewhere, you will be thrown in the prison of hell until you can pay the last penny of what you owe. In other words, you won't be getting out.

So look again at the point the author of Hebrews was making to his Jewish-convert brothers and sisters.

Verse 2

The author wrote that despite the severity of their situations, our predecessors in the faith—the believers in the Old Testament—did not turn from it. What does our text say they did instead? Just look at the example of Moses. It says that “(b)y faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt.”

Moses endured the temporary inconveniences and even struggles that came with trusting God rather than disobey Him. He endured. To today's society, there should be no need for endurance. Instead there should be peace—for them. Tolerance. Acceptance of sinful acts. Everything should be granted at the press of a few buttons. They want it all and they want it yesterday. Yet there is a reason that patience is listed as one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, along with joy and peace. God can and does work good things from times which we must endure.

After his trials, Moses got to see the Promised Land from afar. He didn't get to go in as he was punished with the rest of the Israelites for sinning in the wilderness. Yet Moses had kept his faith, and after seeing the Promised Land, the Scriptures say that he was buried by God Himself. The author of Hebrews, then, reminded his Jewish-convert fellow believers that some of them had seen Jesus with their own eyes and received the things which Moses and the others had only gotten to see from afar through faith.

While you and I have not seen Jesus with our own eyes yet, we have still received Him through the hearing of His Word and how He went to the cross for our sin. You have heard, then, things about Him which those of the Old Testament never got to hear except through a prophecy here or there, again, as shadows of the substance to come in Jesus Himself.

Verse 3

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”

Our predecessors in the faith endured their struggles looking forward to the joy coming in a Savior from sin. Jesus Christ came as that Savior, as you have gotten to hear. He paid the price for all sin on the cross—but He did so looking forward to something Himself as well. He was looking forward to the end of time. He was focused on the day He would return and gather all those who believe in Him to Himself and take them into the joy of the new heaven and new earth.

That joy is our joy as well. By faith, we are called to endure these trying, turbulent, and confusing times so that we will be gathered into the joyful throng of believers old and new. We trust by faith that at that time we will enter that new heaven and new earth promised in Revelation together with them. We find that joy sown in us through the Holy Spirit, who is working in us now to make us patient so that we might also have joy and peace, not only now, in spite of the turbulence around us, but especially at the end, when there will no longer be any conflict, only peace and joy in and with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

