

“Staying the Course”

Hebrews 13:7–16

Remember this?

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the kings' horses and all the kings' men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again.

I don't know who Mr. Dumpty was or what he represented, and I have no idea why or how he fell. Maybe he got tired and slipped off the wall in a slumberous state. Maybe he was careless...or intoxicated. Maybe he was in a state of despair and decided to jump. I once heard someone suggest that he was pushed.

What we do know is that Humpty Dumpty was never the same. His life was shattered; the pieces of his former existence strewn all over the ground, and all the resources and skills of the best and brightest unable to do anything about it.

And that is the tragic part of this tale. Because all of us, to one degree or another, experience trials and traumas and tragedies. But most of us expect to recover. We have the hope that the pain will eventually subside, the grief will gradually diminish, the losses will sooner or later be recuperated, and the hurts will ultimately be healed.

But what do you do when you're Humpty Dumpty? What do you do when the effects of your trials or traumas or tragedies are so devastating or so incapacitating that you *cannot* recover? The pain is permanent? The losses are lasting?

Do you give up? Do you just leave the shattered pieces of your life scattered on the ground, knowing that since they'll never be put back together again, you might as well stop trying? Or do you keep up your desperate search for some new solution in order to find relief? A new kind of glue—some new formula or technique, perhaps, that can mend your broken life and get you back to where you once were?

Or...is there another alternative?

If we don't understand that many of the people to whom the author of Hebrews was writing were in these very dire straits, circumstantially, then we will neither understand nor appreciate the passage we are going to look at this morning. These were Jewish Christians living in a society that was hostile to their beliefs and convictions. Many of them had become the objects of discrimination and persecution. And initially, they were able to endure it because they had a perspective that transcended their circumstances.

But as time went on and the hostility persisted and it became evident that there might not *ever* be relief, some of them took their eyes off Jesus and their eternal hope and began to focus on their circumstances and their losses and their persistent pain. And when that happens it is amazing how quickly one can become discouraged and disillusioned. And just like Peter when he was walking toward the Savior on the Sea of Galilee, once they took their eyes off of Jesus they began to sink.

Some of them said, “I didn't know I was signing up for this. This is not what I thought it was going to be, and I don't know if it's really worth it.”

And what was tempting was that there *was* something they could do to stop the pain, ease the pressure, and recover their losses. All they had to do was simply renounce their faith in Jesus. They could be accepted back by their communities, restored to their families and friends, and experience the level of comfort they had once enjoyed.

And that's why the writer of Hebrews spends so much time talking about the *Truth*. And what is the Truth? Jesus is Lord; Jesus is the fulfillment of God's eternal plan. And that plan is fully in motion right now. After dying on the cross so that our sins could be forgiven, Jesus rose from the dead, then ascended into heaven where He has taken His seat at the right hand of God, the place of absolute authority and supremacy.

And those who put their trust in Jesus enter into a covenant relationship with the Father through Him, a relationship in which our spiritual standing and position is based solely on who Jesus is and what He has done for us. We stand before the Father without guilt and shame, because Jesus bore our sin and our guilt on the cross. We are righteous before the Father because Jesus is righteous, and He imputed His righteousness to us when we put our faith in Him. We are loved by the Father because Jesus is loved by the Father. We are sons and daughters of the Father because Jesus is the Son, and because by His death He made it possible for us to become sons and daughters, and because Jesus said I am not ashamed to call them brothers.

And that means that we are safe and secure in the arms of our heavenly Father at all times, no matter what happens to us in this life. Even when we are persecuted; even when we experience catastrophic circumstances. We can, as we learned last week, "*Be content...for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'*"⁶ So we can confidently say, "*The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?*" (Heb. 13:5b-6).

God's unfailing presence is the basis for unconditional contentment, even when you can't make ends meet, even when you are rejected by your friends and loved ones, even when things are falling apart and they might never be able to be put back together again in this life.

But there is something else that can help us stay the course when the pressure keeps mounting and there is no immediately relief. Look at **verse 7**. ⁷*Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.*

These "leaders" are the ones who had travelled to Rome, preached the gospel, and established the church. It was through their preaching of this word that these people had received salvation, but the fact that the author alludes to this in the past tense indicates that these leaders had since died. This is further supported by the assertion, "consider the outcome of their way of life," which is a technical phrase that has reference to the sum total of a person's life achievements. The implication is, they have completed their service, and "the whole course of their lives, from start to finish, now lies before their disciples and followers for review and imitation" (Bruce, 374).

What is clear is that these leaders were known by all as not just preachers, but as those who practiced what they preached. Their character and conduct were congruent with their message. Someone said it this way: They not only proclaimed the word of God; they adorned the gospel of Christ by their faithful lives (O'Brien, 516). So much so that the author of Hebrews exhorts his hearers to consider closely, even to scrutinize the manner of their leaders' living and imitate their faith. It is not clear whether these leaders died in martyrdom for their faith, but they are placed in the same category of the heroes of the faith in chapter 11.

And just like in chapter 11, the purpose of considering the testimonies of these kind of people who have gone before us is to be inspired by their faith and commitment to the Lord,

to be assured that a life of faithful obedience to God is worth it, and to be reminded that God is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

The author goes on in **verse 8**. ⁸ *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*

I would submit to you this is one of the most powerful, most important, and most comforting declarations in all the Bible! Morris Chapman wrote a song that goes like this:

Everything is changing every day. There are things we thought would last forever that fade and slip away. You can set your feet upon this rock that will not move. You can trust all your tomorrows to this never changing truth. Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Think about that statement: We have a hard time comprehending something or someone who doesn't change. We are in a *constant* state of change. Our bodies, our moods, our emotions, our attitudes, our perspectives, our opinions, our circumstances, our relationships, our plans, our dreams, our ambitions, our communities, our government. Everything about us fluctuates and shifts and alters. That's true of everything in this creation, as well.

But what sets the Creator apart from His creation is that He never changes. He's always the same. There is no shadow of turning with Him. He never changes His mind, because He never has to learn anything new. He never changes His plans because His plan is perfect. He is not fickle or rash or moody. He never gets tired or bored or impatient or surprised. He cannot lie. He cannot be mean or cruel. He cannot be unjust. He cannot be toppled from His throne, He cannot be defeated, and nothing that He has determined to do can be thwarted.

He's the same yesterday, when He, by His own good pleasure, chose to create this world and make man in His image. He is the same today, even though the people in this world have chosen to rebel against Him. And He will be the same a million years from now, when sin will have been totally eradicated and this world will seem to us to have been just a fleeting dream.

Do you know what the fact that Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever means for you?

It means that you can trust Him, because He is absolutely trustworthy. It means that you don't have to be afraid, because He will never leave you nor forsake you. It means that you can count on Him to come through for you at all times and in all circumstances. It means that He loves you with a love that never fluctuates; He watches over you with eyes that never close.

It matters not what happens in the temporal circumstances of this life. It matters not if disaster strikes, or if we lose loved ones, or if we become the targets of violent aggression. Jesus Christ is the Rock on which we stand. He is in control. He is Lord. Nothing can challenge His sovereignty. And He will take care of us if we put our trust in Him.

I believe that is why the author inserted this declaration where He did in this passage. Again, we cannot understand or appreciate the significance of this statement without realizing the devastating, incapacitating circumstances that many of his readers were going through. And He says to them, "Here's some truth you can hang on to during your struggle: Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever."

Hold on to that truth! That's what faith is. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Don't look at your

circumstances. Don't look at other people or institutions or services. They will inevitably disappoint and fail. Look at Jesus.

In spite of how it feels at times, He's still in control. He's not surprised or frustrated or confused by the events that have occurred in your lives. He's on His throne, waiting for the Father's Word, and at just the right time, He'll come and make everything right. Meanwhile, stay the course. For because Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, we can confidently follow Him knowing that He will be sure to complete the salvation He started in us.

The author goes on in **verse 9**. *⁹ Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.*

What do you do when you are in devastating, incapacitating circumstances? The temptation is to try to find relief in whatever way you can. To do whatever is in your power that will ease the pain and help you recover and be restored.

Some of those to whom the author of Hebrews was writing were so desperate to find relief from their suffering that they were being drawn away from Christian fellowship and doctrine to expressions of worship practiced within Judaism. They were embracing aspects of *Jewish* community life that were at odds with the gospel of grace through Jesus Christ.

The particular practice in Judaism to which the author is referring was a fellowship meal in which participants believed that God's grace was imparted through the meal itself. In other words, Jews in the first century believed that by eating this food spiritual strength was imparted.

The author of Hebrews says, "Do not be led away" by this teaching. That verb literally means "to flow away" (like a river) but is used figuratively in Scripture of being misled, led astray, or carried off. "The image is of a person who is inadequately grounded and is liable to be swept away by the currents of false teaching" (O'Brien, 518).

In this case, the author asserts, you are trying to find relief and respite from your painful circumstances by participating in things that are powerless and superstitious. These foods have no value to those who eat them. They are not the true means of grace and spiritual strength. Grace comes from Jesus and the pure gospel, with no manmade additives or artificial sweeteners.

Stick to Jesus alone, who alone was sufficient for your leaders, and who alone is sufficient for you.

The author then gives a metaphor in the next few verses to drive His point home that it's utterly foolish to try to go back to the way things were, in order to recover one's losses in this life, for those things are now useless and obsolete. We need to stay the course, and look forward to what is ahead. Look at **verses 10-12**. *¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. ¹¹ For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. ¹² So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.*

Isn't this typical of the writer of Hebrews? Just when you think you're beginning to understand Him and His logic, He throws you a theological curveball that makes your head spin. Once again, in writing to Jewish people familiar with the Levitical sacrificial system, He uses the metaphor of the tabernacle to make His point. When He states "*we have an altar*

from which those who serve the tent (tabernacle) have no right to eat” (v. 10), He is reminding them of the clear delineation between those who belong to the Old Covenant and those who belong to the New.

The participants of the New Covenant (those who have put their faith in Christ) draw spiritual sustenance and life from a source unavailable to those of the tabernacle, and that source is the sacrifice of Christ. And that means that nothing in the Old Covenant sacrificial system is effective or helpful or beneficial to those who continue to worship within that system. Christ’s sacrifice has made it obsolete.

As it relates to the audience of this letter, the author is saying, “Don’t try to get reestablished with that old system, just because you think that by getting reestablished you might get in the good graces of your old friends and your lives will be comfortable again. That’s a slap in Jesus’ face. The best thing you can do is identify fully with Jesus, even if it means being an outsider with those old friends.

That’s what verses 11-12 are talking about. The reference to going outside the camp comes from Leviticus 16:27 which reads, *“The bull and the goat for the sin offerings, whose blood was brought into the Most Holy Place to make atonement, must be taken outside the camp, their hides, flesh, and offal are to be burned up.”* This verse forms the backdrop of Hebrews 13:11-14, in which Christ is heralded as the ultimate Day of Atonement Sacrifice.

But what the author wants to communicate is that there was even significance in Jesus’ suffering outside the gate of Jerusalem. Remember, He was crucified at the place of the skull called Golgotha, outside the walls of Jerusalem, a shameful place, an unclean, unholy place. Yet, paradoxically, His death outside the gate is what makes people holy under the new covenant. In that hideous, unholy, evil place outside the walls of Jerusalem where Jesus died as an outcast, God’s most astonishing work was accomplished for mankind. It was there that He made it possible for us to be holy.

And that leads the author to make a stunning exhortation in **verses 13-14**. ¹³ *Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.* ¹⁴ *For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.*

We’ve been given many admonitions in Hebrews to *approach Jesus*. But prior to this all of them have been exhortation to “come in” or “enter in.” The author has told us to enter into His promised rest (4:11), to come into that heavenly sanctuary where Jesus has gone before us, and to boldly approach the throne in heaven (10:22). But now He tells us to go out to Jesus. Out to where Jesus bore reproach and shame, and bear the disgrace that He endured. In other words, He’s telling us to willingly identify ourselves with Jesus no matter what the cost, even if it means suffering shame and reproach ourselves.

This would be equivalent to Jesus telling His disciples to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Him (Mark 8:34).

Here’s what that meant specifically for the recipients of this letter: They must reject Judaism, however secure it may make them feel, and be resolute in their identification with Christ. “The camp” in verse 13 represents the religion of Judaism, grounded in the tabernacle rituals of the Old Covenant.

For the listeners to turn their backs on Judaism it will mean bearing the “reproach” experienced by Christ. And bearing that disgrace may result in bodily harm. It may last throughout one’s entire life. It may result in one’s death. But according to the author of Hebrews, that shouldn’t be a deterrent. Because the reward one receives at the end is far

greater than the suffering one has to endure in the present. Paul said it this way, *“For I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us” (Roman 8:18)*. He was even more specific in another passage. *“For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor. 4:17-18)*.

That’s the meaning of faith. Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (11:1). And the test of whether or not you are sure of what you hope for and certain of what you do not see is when your circumstances seem to contradict your hope...or when your hope is not being realized in the way or in the time frame that you thought...or when everybody around you says your hope is false, your hope is baseless, and you get ridiculed for it.

That’s when we need to fix our eyes on Jesus. That’s when we need to know the truth that He’s the same yesterday, today, and forever. That’s why we need to seek the city that is to come, which is our real home, and where our true citizenship lies. We can’t look at our circumstances. We can’t trust our emotions. We must not revert back to those old methods of coping that are powerless and disappointing.

We need to fix our eyes on Jesus and seek the city that is to come.

In spite of how it feels, or how we or other people may interpret our circumstances, He’s still in control. He’s not surprised or frustrated or confused by the events that have occurred in our lives. He’s on His throne, waiting for the Father’s Word, and at just the right time, He’ll come and make everything right.

Meanwhile, we must stay the course. For because Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, we can confidently follow Him knowing that He will be sure to complete the salvation He started in us.