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### Sermon Summary #30

#### **Better and Abiding: The Double Perfection that Brings Joy Hebrews 10:32-39**

This portion of God's Word that we call the Letter to the Hebrews has occupied our attention now for thirty weeks. Although I had studied and even preached through Hebrews many years ago, its impact on me this time has been far beyond anything I experienced before. Over and over again, almost on a weekly basis, this letter has rocked my world. I've been encouraged one week and challenged the next. I've been deeply convicted by the Holy Spirit only then to be reminded of the glory of having had my sins finally and forever forgiven. I've been stunned by the majesty of Jesus, our Great High Priest, one week, only then to be overwhelmed by his meekness and mercy the next.

I'm saying this to you today because, as powerfully as my life has been influenced and shaped by what we've been studying thus far in Hebrews, I can honestly say that no portion of this book has captivated my attention and brought conviction to my heart quite like chapter ten, verses thirty-two to thirty-nine. In fact, it's really just **one verse** in this paragraph that I have in mind, one verse that leaves me breathless and even a bit confused.

I'm breathless at the thought of how these people were able to conduct themselves the way they did. I'm confused because it makes no sense. That is to say, it makes no sense from a purely human point of view. *I am utterly unable to explain what happened in the hearts of these men and women without appealing to the sovereign, supernatural, invasion of divine grace in their lives.* What we are reading here in v. 34 is so contrary to our normal way of thinking, so counter-intuitive, so utterly counter-cultural that if it doesn't leave you shaking your head and wondering if perhaps someone tinkered with the text then you simply aren't paying attention.

Hebrews 10:34 – *“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.”* How do you account for that? What could possibly have happened to these people that would enable them to “joyfully” accept the plundering of their property?

This is the passage that I want us to think about today. I don't know what effect it will have on you. I don't know exactly how I'm going to be different from having soaked my soul in this remarkable statement. What I do know is that *if you and I leave here today unchanged and indifferent* then I've failed miserably in my responsibility as your pastor. If nothing else, if this text has no other effect on you than to cause you to walk away bewildered and incredulous and spiritually shaken, then I'll regard today as at least having been a mild success. But I hope it will do more. That's my prayer for myself and I'm praying that for all of you too.

I expect that some of you think I'm overstating the case, that this is sermonic hyperbole, deliberate exaggeration on my part for no good reason other than to hold your attention for a few minutes on a Sunday morning. I assure you that such is not the case. But the only way I'm going to convince you is by turning to the text and letting the Holy Spirit do his work. So let's begin.

#### *Persecution!*

Needless to say, v. 34 does not hang suspended in mid air. There is a context within which this verse must be read. Something had happened in the lives of these Christian men and women that we need to understand if we are going to make sense of v. 34.

*According to vv. 32-33, it was persecution, pure and simple.* Our author draws their attention to those earlier days immediately following their conversion to faith in Jesus as the one who in every conceivable way is “better” than

everything and everyone that preceded him in the Old Testament. He describes their conversion by saying they had been **“enlightened”**. In other words, if I may use the words of the Apostle Paul from 2 Corinthians 4:6, “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

So the first thing that happened is that ***God’s loving light invaded their darkened hearts and minds and gave them sight to see the beauty and majesty of the glory of God revealed in Jesus.*** When God’s grace takes hold of us, the lights go on!

But it doesn’t end with us. It’s not just that we are filled with the light of God’s grace. We are then, in turn, ***to shine forth as lights in a dark and depraved world so that others might see what God has done.*** Or, again to use the words of Paul in Philippians 2:15, it is in this “crooked and twisted generation” that we are to “shine as lights in the world.” ***God first shines his light into us and then we in turn shine that same light into the world by the way we live and proclaim the gospel and especially by the way we respond to suffering and persecution.***

Almost immediately after these people had been “enlightened” with the saving light of God’s redeeming grace, ***they “endured a hard struggle with sufferings”*** (v. 32b). The language of our author is fascinating and instructive. The word translated “endured” is a reference to war and means “to stand one’s ground” or “to remain on the battlefield” instead of running away in cowardice. He then switches to an athletic metaphor, using a word here translated “hard struggle.” You’ll recognize the Greek word: *athlesis*, from which we get our English word, “athletic.”

This “hard struggle with sufferings” took two forms: public ***“reproach”*** and ***“affliction.”*** The word “reproach” pertains to one’s character. They slandered you. They dragged your name through the mud. They accused you of horrific sins that you have not committed. They ridiculed you for your faith. This is the same word he will use in 13:13 to describe the “reproach” that Jesus himself endured. It’s our author’s way of saying that ***these believers had so identified with Jesus that they endured the same sort of public humiliation to which he was exposed.***

Notice that he says they were ***“publicly exposed”*** to such verbal mistreatment. The word translated “publicly exposed” is related to our English word for “theater,” with the idea of making a spectacle of someone or holding them up for derision. The word “affliction” pertains more to maltreatment of one’s body. They beat you, they deprived you of shelter and food, and then they threw you into prison without justifiable cause.

Evidently the non-Christian world surrounding them saw this light in their lives and hated it and did everything they could to snuff it out. Jesus told us to expect this to happen. In the Sermon on the Mount, and virtually in the same breath, Jesus said, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16), but he also declared, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11). So not everyone gives glory to the Father when they see Christians shining. Some try to kill them.

We don’t know what provoked this persecution. It may be that these Christians simply stopped engaging in the sinful activities that formerly characterized their lives. They stood out in a crowd and said No, and this offended those with whom they used to run wild. Or perhaps their vocal testimony to the glory of God as revealed in Jesus and his atoning sacrifice was deemed “politically incorrect” and the civil authorities took action to silence them.

It would appear that the opposition they encountered was official, that is to say, it came from the political authorities of that day. We know this because it resulted in some of them being thrown in prison. In fact, just as there were two forms of persecution, v. 33 seems to suggest that there were ***three groups of Christians who suffered***: some suffered “reproach and affliction,” some were thrown into prison, and others got in trouble simply for “being partners” with them. They stood by them. They embraced them in solidarity. They didn’t turn and run away in fear but said, “We are here for those you are abusing. We stand with them. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are not afraid to declare ourselves partners with them.”

We should also take note of the fact that this word translated ***“partners”*** is the rendering of the Greek word for *fellowship*! We talk about Christian “fellowship” today but usually mean no more than that we shared a meal together or hung out in a small group or enjoyed sitting next to another Christian in a church service like this one.

But for these people it went much deeper. Their unity and sense of community displayed itself in their open and willing identification with those who suffered worst of all.

So again, this is not just an angry mob rising up to torment Christians or some disgruntled co-workers harassing them at their place of employment. ***This is official, political opposition on the part of the governing powers.*** And instead of hiding in cowardice, others stepped forward and went to the prisons where their brothers and sisters were being held, perhaps to bring them food, perhaps to encourage them, and undoubtedly to pray for them. And they made no secret of the fact that they too were Christians.

It's entirely likely that those arrested had been severely beaten and were left untended and hurting. In any case, the rest of the Christians had to make a decision: ***Do we keep our mouths shut and lock our doors and say and do nothing? Or do we go to our Christian friends and provide the help they need and in doing so very likely expose ourselves to the same mistreatment they've suffered? Let's not forget, we've got families too. What will become of our homes and possessions and our jobs and our reputation if we step out to help them?***

Their choice is described in v. 34. Evidently, when the light of God's grace shone in their hearts to give them the knowledge of Jesus Christ, among the many things that they experienced was ***a transformation from being selfish and self-protective to being compassionate!*** They were so burdened by the burdens of their fellow believers that they simply couldn't remain silent or keep still. The compassion that Jesus himself displayed toward the sick and hurting and abused and the outcasts of his day came alive in their hearts as well.

***What some might consider reckless and irresponsible behavior on their part, the Bible calls compassion!***

Nothing is said explicitly in our passage, but human nature tells us that those who decided to partner with their imprisoned brothers and sisters probably faced considerable opposition for doing so. You can almost hear some in that Christian community saying something like this:

“This is none of our business. We've got our own lives to think about. We've got families to protect. Besides, God has ordained the governing powers and we are supposed to be submissive to their authority. Surely there has to be another way of helping these people, a safer way, a way that won't put our lives and possessions in jeopardy. But if you go down to that prison and identify with those who got arrested you will only provoke the civil authorities and stir up even more anger. How can we possibly carry on the work of the ministry if all our people are in prison or if we suffer the loss of money and livelihood? And besides all that, why didn't they behave themselves more discreetly? Couldn't they have borne witness to Christ in silence or at least without drawing so much attention to themselves? Why should we let their extravagance and stupidity put our lives in jeopardy?”

That certainly sounds reasonable, doesn't it? But many weren't convinced. Compassion and love and the gospel of Jesus Christ trumped what at first sounded like common sense.

#### *The Plundering of Property and Joy!*

What happened next isn't all that surprising. Whether it was the civil authorities who authorized it or this action was simply the reaction of an angry mob, they went to the homes of these Christians and plundered their property. We don't know exactly how this happened or if perhaps it involved wholesale destruction of their possessions, but they suffered great loss.

As I said, that comes as no surprise. We shouldn't be shocked that Christians were mistreated this way. But what takes my breath away is how they responded: “you ***joyfully*** accepted the plundering of your property” (v. 34).

Now, as I see things, there are three ways to respond to this sort of mistreatment. One is to take the stoical path and simply resign yourself to the outcome without passion or resentment or any feelings at all. “Oh well, easy come, easy go.” At worst, one might feel a bit gloomy and morose, but that's about the extent of it.

Yet another response is one of dignified and even justifiable outrage. “How dare they do this to us? We've got our rights. The laws are there to protect us too! We've done nothing to deserve this. After all, it's my stuff! ***Who do they***

*think they are, stealing my stuff?* I worked hard to get it. I didn't steal it. I didn't swindle someone to get it. The money that purchased that stuff was righteously earned. I labored and toiled 40 hours a week for this. It may not be much, but it's mine. If I had gained this property through illegal means I could understand why God would allow this to happen. But I don't deserve this."

***But they responded neither with passive resignation nor angry defiance. Rather, they responded with joy!*** Joy? Yes, joy! When I read this my mind races back to the early days of the church in the book of Acts. The disciples had been arrested and severely beaten for preaching the gospel of Christ. "Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name" (Acts 5:41).

Now don't misunderstand what's going on here. These weren't communists or socialists who believed private property was a sin. They didn't respond this way because deep down inside their souls they knew that personal possessions were inherently evil and that they were probably better off not owning anything at all.

I don't doubt for a moment that there was some measure of pain and discomfort at losing all their stuff. They had to live somewhere. They had to provide food and shelter for their families. They needed clothing and the basics of life just to survive on a daily basis. But no matter how stressful and disappointing this may have been, the dominant passion in their hearts was joy. ***Joy trumped all feelings of entitlement.***

But how does this happen? This isn't natural to human beings. In fact, it's utterly contrary to everything we know about human nature. We prefer safety and convenience and money and all the time in the world to do whatever we want. And when such pleasures come our way we rejoice and when we suffer their loss we gripe and complain and become embittered.

Quite obviously something had occurred in the lives of these people that enabled them to live largely free of any sense of attachment to things, to possessions, to property. I'm quite sure they were more than happy to enjoy whatever physical and monetary blessings God had given to them, and rightly so. ***But they weren't enslaved to their possessions.*** They weren't dependent on them. ***Their happiness or joy was tethered to something other than stuff.***

***How does one experience that kind of freedom?*** Is it a special or superior kind of grace that God only gives to a handful of super saints? No. The answer is found in the second half of v. 34 – "since you knew [or a better translation would be, 'it is **because** you knew'] that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one."

When our author referred to their having been "enlightened" I think he must have had something more in mind than simply their conversion to saving faith in Jesus. That is obviously involved. But they had come to know something more than that their sins were forgiven. ***They had come to know and understand that the future God had promised to them was immeasurably better and more lasting than anything they could own or experience in this life.*** At the heart of their conversion to Christ was the rock-solid confidence that what God had in store for them was not only "better" than anything in this present world but was also eternal, never-ending, or as our author says, "abiding".

This wasn't some fleeting notion in their heads. ***They "knew" it!*** They banked everything on the truth of what God had promised them. When their furniture was being destroyed and their money was being looted and their houses were burning to the ground, one thought filled their hearts and minds: God has prepared for us an eternity of joy and blessing and wealth and unparalleled satisfaction in his presence.

They just didn't put much stock in this world. As Paul said in Colossians 1:12-13, God "has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son." Their treasure was in heaven, hidden in Christ, and no government official or angry mob could do anything to take it from them. John Calvin put it this way:

"Indeed wherever the feeling of heavenly good things is strong, there is no taste for the world with its allurements, so that no sense either of poverty or of shame can overwhelm our minds with sorrow. If then we wish to bear anything for Christ with patience . . . let us grow accustomed to frequent meditation on that happiness in comparison with which all the goods of this world are but rubbish" (153).

The British NT scholar F. F. Bruce, now with the Lord, put it best when he said, “The eternal inheritance laid up for them was *so real in their eyes* that they could light-heartedly bid farewell to material possessions, which were short-lived in any case” (271; emphasis mine).

### *Better and Abiding*

All of us want both quality and quantity. *We want to experience a happiness and fulfillment and joy that is qualitatively the best and quantitatively the most.* And that is precisely what these Christians knew they had in Christ. The “possession” they had received by faith was both “better” and “abiding.”

I can’t prove it, but I honestly believe the author of Hebrews was drawing on the truth of Psalm 16:11 when he wrote this. There David said:

***“You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16:11).***

He’s not talking here merely about joy, but “fullness” of joy, which is to say, joy to the max, joy overflowing, joy that is qualitatively better and more satisfying than any joy the world can offer. And it is a joy that lasts forever. This isn’t a fleeting, transient, temporary, here-today-gone-tomorrow joy. These are spiritual pleasures that extend into eternity; pleasures that never lose their capacity to enthrall and fascinate and captivate our hearts.

And that is precisely what these believers had come to know was theirs. ***Therefore, the key to experiencing the kind of freedom that undermines your dependence on things for happiness is the knowledge of what God has promised to do and provide for his children. When you know that God has provided a better and more abiding possession you aren’t paralyzed by loss. You aren’t devastated when your faith in Christ brings suffering.***

So, what precisely is this “better” and “abiding” possession that he’s talking about? Is it just another version of the same stuff we have in this life? Is he talking about the streets of gold in the new heaven and new earth? I don’t think so. All we have to do to figure out the nature of this “possession” is to think back over what we’ve already been told in Hebrews.

In Hebrews 1 we were told that we’ve been given Jesus, the Son of God, greater than all the angelic hosts combined.

In Hebrews 2:10 we are assured that God is bringing us, his sons and daughters, into glory!

In Hebrews 2:14-15 we’ve been set free from Satan and the fear of death.

In Hebrews 2:17 he explained that we have for ourselves Jesus as “a merciful and faithful high priest.”

In Hebrews 2:18 we are assured that Jesus is always available “to help those who are being tempted.”

In Hebrews 4 the promised possession is eternal rest in the age to come.

In Hebrews 6:11 we are told that we can experience “full assurance of hope until the end.”

In Hebrews 6:19 Jesus is to us “a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.”

In Hebrews 7:25 we are promised that Jesus saves “to the uttermost” all who draw near to God through him and that “he always lives to make intercession” for us.

In Hebrews 8 we have in Jesus a better covenant enacted on “better promises” (v. 6), that assures us of the knowledge of God and intimacy with him forever.

In Hebrews 9 we are assured that the sacrifice for sin offered by Jesus finally and forever cleanses us from sin and liberates our conscience from shame and guilt.

And in Hebrews 11-13 we will see yet even more such blessings that together constitute what our author calls a better and abiding possession.

***What all this means is that the “better” and “abiding” possession is God himself in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. Nothing in this world can give you anything better. Nothing in this world can give you anything more lasting and abiding.***

And the confidence, the assurance, the knowledge that all this is ours freely and forever comes only as we meditate on the truth of the gospel and think deeply on the beauty of God as revealed in Jesus and marvel at the forgiveness of our sins. ***The key to indomitable and irrepressible joy in the face of unimaginable suffering is in knowing that***

***what we have in Christ surpasses in quality and quantity everything this life can offer.*** Until such time as this truth takes root in your heart, you'll never experience the sort of miraculous transformation and unyielding courage and unshakable joy found in these Christians of the first century.

In one final observation, let me connect what we see here in v. 34 with what our author earlier said in Hebrews 10:24-25. There he exhorted us to gather together in community on a regular basis "to stir up one another to love and good works" and to encourage one another. How do we encourage one another? We do it by reminding one another of the better and more abiding possession we have in Jesus Christ! We stir up each other to the good work of becoming partners with those who are being persecuted and identifying with them in their suffering and loving them in their distress, even if it means the loss of our property. And how do we do that? By constantly pointing one another to the better and abiding possession we have in Christ!

*"Therefore"*

The ***practical purpose*** in describing what these believers had experienced at some time earlier in their Christian lives is so that they will find strength to endure the pressures and temptations that are currently coming their way. This we see in vv. 35-36. This is one of the primary goals in my preaching and it ought to be one of the primary goals in your community group gatherings and in your D-group meetings. Not only my aim but yours as well must be to encourage others to see and savor the splendor and beauty and all-satisfying joy of what we have in Christ so that each of us will come to treasure him above anything this world can offer.

In other words, if I can simply appeal to the overarching theme of Hebrews, and to use the words of the song we sing so often here at Bridgeway, our goal must be to help one another understand and enjoy the undeniable truth that ***Jesus is better!***