

Title: What If?  
Text: Hebrews 10.39 and the warning passages in Hebrews  
Theme: The Perseverance of the Saints  
Series: Hebrews #32  
Prop Stmtnt Perseverance is clinging to the cross no matter what.

Throughout our study of Hebrews, we have been treated to rich doctrine that drives both warning and encouragement. Taken together, these warnings and encouragement are the basis of the Bible's teaching on what it means to continue in the faith, or the doctrine of perseverance. We have come to the end of chapter 10, in our study of this book, and I am taking two sermons (this morning and next) to summarize and synchronize these warning and encouragement passages in order to help us understand this doctrine and to ask the Spirit of God to reveal to us the true condition of our hearts.

Read Text:

Our system of government, constitution and bill of rights are pretty amazing in comparison to the history of nations. These were given birth in a time and in reaction to the many of examples in Europe when the King (or recognized national leader) determined the religion of the nation. England, for example declared itself to be Protestant by *King Henry VIII*, who was not protesting the theology of the church of Rome as much as he was protesting the fact that the pope refused to give him permission to divorce his wife. Before all of this, Henry VIII had attempted to refute the teachings of Martin Luther and he even wrote a little booklet (which was probably written mostly by Thomas More), for which Henry VIII received from Rome the title, "Defender of the Faith." The original reason for the spilt of England from Rome was for personal reasons on the part of the King, and yet, there was enough protestant theology in England to sustain the break, at least for a while. Behind the scenes was a man named *Thomas Cranmer* who became, under Henry VIII, the archbishop, that is the leader of the Church of England. Cranmer could only push Henry VIII so far. So, he waited. When Henry died, his sickly son, Edward came to the throne and between Cranmer's respected position, his writings, preaching, and his influence upon young Edward, Cranmer was able to have quite an impact in England as he promoted the gospel, by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. He revised the Book of Common Prayer, that directed how the people were to pray in the churches and he wrote a series of sermons that all the ministers in England were to preach from their pulpits. Cranmer then set about to revise the formal doctrinal statement of the church and had just completed it and sent it to Parliament when Edward died.

Protestant nobles (along with Cranmer) attempted to put Lady Jane Grey on the throne as queen, because she was protestant, when Mary was really next in line. Mary won and Lady Jane's Grey 9-day reign came to an end rather abruptly, like her life shortly thereafter. Mary, was the daughter of Henry's first wife and remembered how poorly her mother was treated and came to power determined to right all of the wrongs that had taken place. Immediately, protestant leaders were removed from government positions and from pulpits. Cranmer was arrested and sent to prison. It was during this time that

Mary earned the nickname, *Bloody Mary*. Champions of the gospel like Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley were burned at the stake. To this day, you can go to Oxford and see the place where the pavement stops for bit revealing a collage of stones in the form of a cross that are several hundred years old that mark the place of their death. Just as the flames reached their bodies, Latimer said to his colleague in the gospel, “Be of good comfort, Mr. Ridley and play the man. We shall this day light a candle by God’s grace, in England, as I trust never shall be put out.”

But not all responded like that. Cranmer was terrified as he considered what it would be like to be burned at the stake. And so, in the weeks before his scheduled execution he wrote a letter to the queen, in which he recanted what he had said that he believed. He swore allegiance to the queen and the church of Rome. You can only imagine the effect of his recantation. Was it all a lie? Did Cranmer really do this? Did Cranmer really now believe that he had been wrong? What are we supposed to believe? Ironically, Ridley (who was executed just a few months before) was a student of Cranmer’s who through Cranmer’s teaching of the Scriptures at Cambridge came to believe in the pure gospel. So, was Cranmer really a believer or was this revealing that he never truly believed.

But, it’s not all history is it? This is a very fresh issue and for many of us a raw one. We know people, some of whom are in our families who at one time professed faith in Christ, seemed to demonstrate evidence and signs of spiritual life, but who as of today are not walking in obedience to Christ and have very little affection for the gospel. Are they genuine believers? What do we do with that? Over and over, the book of Hebrews has admonished us to “Press on Pilgrims.” But, what if we don’t? What are we supposed to think about those who for years seemed to be believers, but if they were arrested for being a Christian today, there would not be enough evidence to support that accusation? Are they, or are they not believers? And, if it happens to be people that we considered to be more spiritual than us, then could it not happen to us? That is the issue – isn’t it? And, I am guessing that 99% of us struggle from time to time with doubts about the validity of our salvation and wonder if we really believe. Let’s look at the warning passages:

Hebrews 2.1-4

Hebrews 3.7- 4.13

Hebrews 6.4-8

Hebrews 10.26-31

Hebrews 12.25-29

These are serious warnings. How are we to take these? 1) There are those who claim that once you are saved, you are always saved, no matter what. If you prayed to receive Jesus, you are a believer, even if you stop believing and deny the gospel. 2) There are those who claim that even though you, at one time believed, that you can lose your salvation. 3) There is a third group that says, since the Bible is so clear that once you are saved that you are always saved, that these passages must be warning us about something other than our eternal status, but must be warning us about the loss of our rewards. 4) A fourth way that some have taken this is that these warnings are give prospectively. That is, they are like the warnings alongside of the road that tell you about the sharp turn ahead. They are

there to keep you on the road, knowing that you are going to stay on the road. 5) Another way is to see these warnings as being given to the “professing” church. That is, these warnings are given to all who claim to be believers, but, knowing that not all who profess faith in Christ actually possess faith in Christ. Now, I am going to deal with these next Sunday. But before we can work through these, we need to step back and make sure that we all understand some important points that really inform and frame this discussion.

### 1. **Profession does not mean conversion.**

In Matthew 13, Mark 4 and Luke 8, Jesus taught a parable about the sower, the seed and the soil. The seed is the Word of God and the different types soil refer to the different types of hearts that receive the Word. The first type of soil is the hard ground that yields absolutely no response whatsoever. The second type of soil is the shallow soil that initially shows some promise, but it does not last very long at all. This describes people who initially profess faith in the gospel, but who really have no long term commitment to it. They may be excited and emotional but when what they claim to believe encounters persecution and testing, they give up, give in, and give out. Their faith was a convenient faith. At the moment, it was convenient to believe. But when it becomes inconvenient to believe, they pitch it – why? They are not committed to Christ but, to convenience. Initially the gospel was a comfort to them. But at the moment of profession, you cannot tell if they really embrace the essence of the gospel or the comforts of the gospel. If you only believe the gospel because of the comforts that it brings, then when holding to the gospel brings about the loss of comfort, then you will punt the gospel because all you want is the comfort. Is the gospel simply a means to another end, or since the gospel is really all about God, is the gospel the end? Do you really trust in Christ alone, or do you profess faith in Christ because of what you get from it? The third type of soil is the type that also has thorns in it. Both grow for a while, but over time, the thorns choke out the good plants. Jesus identifies the thorns as the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches. When the cares of this world crowd in upon the gospel, when the promises of money compete with the promises of God, then what you really believe is revealed.

Do you see what is going on? When you initially profess faith, you don’t know your own heart. We are right to preach the gospel to our children. We are right to explain to them the eternal importance of believing and what is at stake. But, we are also right to tell them that time will reveal whether or not they are true believers. That is why when our seniors stand before us at graduation time, I tell them, that in the next few years they are going to find out whether or not they really believe the gospel. Up until this point, most of them have been sheltered from the “cares of this world.” But, when the “cares of this world” press in on them, then they will see what they really believe. God uses pressure to reveal the authenticity of your faith. Beloved, this is one of my greatest concerns as your pastor. I fear that some of you made a profession of faith, but that your true motivation is not absolute love and trust in God, but, you prayed a prayer as a ticket to go to heaven. You attend church, you have your friends, and you have settled for a cultural Christianity, but if you were to look back over the past ten years, you cannot honestly say that there is greater love for God, greater affections for the gospel, greater burden for lost people, greater passion for the church, greater longings to know Christ or greater desire to really

know the Word. If there is no discernable growth in affections, how do you know if you really believe?

## 2. Conversion is validated by fruit.

This is what the entire book of James is about. The book of Romans answers the question – “How are we justified (declared righteous by God)?” The answer is: by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But, just because you can put that answer down on a sheet of paper or repeat those words with your lips does not mean that in your heart of hearts that you have embraced Christ as King and you are willing to submit to his authority in your life. Time will reveal that. That is why the book of James answers the question – What kind of a faith is it? How do we know if we have saving faith or we have a false faith? The answer is: Saving faith is revealed in spiritual growth over the long haul. The epistle of 1 John speaks specifically of the evidences of spiritual growth. Gospel fruit is seen in love for God, love for the people of God, the love of and the pursuit of righteousness and the love of and submission to the commands of God.

In John 8, Jesus is surrounded by a large crowd in Jerusalem. It was during one of the holy days and the crowd was buzzing with excitement. As Jesus taught them, (v.30), “many believed in him.” Was that genuine belief? Listen to what Jesus said in the very next verse *“to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.’” (31-32)* So, were they genuine believers? In essence Jesus said that time will tell. Abiding in Christ is the same thing as perseverance.

## 3. Perseverance is the fruit of genuine conversion.

Look back at point #1. I am arguing that profession does not automatically mean conversion. Many people make professions of faith, but perseverance over the long haul reveals whether or not the belief was authentic. Not only is this what Christ said in John 8 and then later in John 15 when he taught on the vine, but it is also what the early church understood and taught as well. When Barnabas heard the reports of conversions in the Syrian city of Antioch, he was thrilled and went there. And when he got there *“and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose” (Acts 11.23)*. Later on at the city of Antioch in the region of Pisidian, Paul and Barnabas had a similar encounter with people who professed faith in Christ. *“They spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God” (Acts 13.43)*. Paul and Barnabas went back and visited the churches that they had established during their first missionary trip and along with appointing elders in those churches and praying for them they ministered to these believers by *“encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14.22)* We find out in Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, that when he had not heard from them in a while, he was concerned that their trials had overwhelmed them and that in the end there was no gospel. When he couldn’t stand it any longer, Paul said, *“I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.” (1 Thess. 3.5)* Paul did not assume that just because there was an initial

response to the gospel that this meant genuine conversion. Paul knew and taught that perseverance is the fruit of genuine conversion.

Is that not exactly what Jesus taught in the parable of the sower, the seed and the soil? It is only the fourth type of soil that Christ considers to be authentic faith. But, you protest, wasn't there at least some growth in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> types of soil? How do you know that this was not belief? Only the fourth type of soil actually brings forth a harvest, that's how! Let's say that you are growing corn and at the end of the growing season you have all of these corn plants, but none of them have any corn on them. They are green, they are tall, they are standing neatly in rows, but there is no corn. Now, I don't want to be guilty of taking a parable and pressing it too far. But this much is obvious. Farmers want the fruit, not just the plants. Initial signs of faith are not the same as genuine saving faith.

Matthew 7.15-20

Perseverance is the fruit of genuine conversion. Brothers and sisters, that is exactly how I take these warning passages in Hebrews. But, I need to make something else very clear.

#### 4. **Perseverance is not perfection.**

From the "Lord's prayer" we learn that believers are expected to confess their sins until they are with Christ. Paul acknowledged his own failures and the obvious fact that he had not "arrived" (Phil 3.12). As long as we are in these mortal bodies we will sin. All believers are exhorted to grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3.18). Zechariah, Peter and Barnabas all continued to fight against sin. This means that we do not believe perfectly, but yet we do not quit believing and instead press on. We do not obey perfectly, but when we sin, we don't quit the fight, but rather confess it, repent of it and press on. We don't press on perfectly, do we? But, pressing on means that in spite of our fits and starts and times of weakness and doubt, that we look in the mirror and say, "Soul, who are you and what are you going to do?" Have you ever had one of those conversations? Have you ever looked at yourself in the mirror, not for the purpose of looking at your appearance, but you stopped and looked at your eyes, trying to discern your heart and wondering who the real you was down inside your soul? If you are honest, what you will find is not pretty. There are so many broken pieces inside of each one of us. So, if perseverance is not being perfect, what is it?

#### 5. **Perseverance is faithfulness through trial and temptation.**

The most important issue in all of life is the gospel. The fact that you have heard the gospel does not mean that you have actually believed the gospel. The fact that you have professed to believe it, does not guarantee that you have been genuinely converted. True conversion is seen in the fruit of perseverance and perseverance is seen in how you respond to the cares and expectations of this world (peer pressure), whether or not you give up on Jesus when it is going to cost you money, and by how you respond to trials. There is nothing more important, than knowing that you are a believer. Now, when God in his kindness and mercy visits your life with trials like cancer, or loss of job, or loss of

friends, and in that trial, you persevere, you discover two things. 1) God is faithful and 2) I am one of his! That my friend is the greatest joy – ever! But, I want to be more specific. When I speak of faithfulness, I am not speaking of a works-based faithfulness, but a faith-based faithfulness that is set on display by a long obedience in the same direction. That is why...

6. **Faithfulness is clinging to the promises of God, no matter what.**

Now, do you remember what I said toward the end of the sermon last week? (That's really not fair is it?) I took you back to Habbakuk 2 and to Romans 1.16-17 and demonstrated how that the phrase, "the righteous shall live by faith" speaks of the means by which we become believers and the means by which we continue as believers. Christianity is from faith to faith. We are saved by faith and we continue by faith. We are never called to trust in our own efforts. Perseverance is not going through the motions or trusting in your own behavior, achievements or righteousness in order not to lose your salvation. Never! Persevering faith is persevering in THE faith. It is in the continual belief in and submission to the gospel. Persevering faith is not looking back at your past accomplishments and accolades. Persevering faith is clinging to the promises of God, no matter what. Persevering faith is believing the gospel right now. Persevering faith is choosing to consider the promises of God to be of more value than anything that this world offers me right now. Now, I do not do that perfectly. There are times when I waver in my belief, and doubt God's goodness and question his plan. Like Peter, I stumble. Like John the Baptist, I have doubts. Persevering faith is not perfect faith. Persevering faith is continuing the fight for faith even after I stumble and even in times of doubt. Though my faith is imperfect, the One to whom I look has no flaws. Though my faith is imperfect, his promises are perfect. *Therefore, persevering faith is the imperfect holding on to the perfect promises of our all-sufficient Savior.* We don't hold perfectly, but neither do we let go, because in the end, it is God who has the hold on us and he will never let go. *Some day, by God's grace, I will believe, perfectly just like Him.* "I believe; help my unbelief." Mark 9.24 We are not home – yet. But, "we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls." (Heb. 10.39)

When Bloody Mary received the letter of recantation from Thomas Cranmer, she thought it disingenuous (and actually she was right) and instead of accepting it, she ordered him to be burned at the stake anyway. The date for Cranmer's death was set. The very thing that he feared so much was now unavoidable. But, instead of being a crisis for Cranmer, it became a time of clarity. In the end, he repented of his recantation and reaffirmed his belief in the gospel by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. And when the fire was lit at the stake to which he was tied, he placed his hand into it and declared, "I have sinned, in that I signed with my hand what I did not believe with my heart."

- tis grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved, how precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed.
- Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come, tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.