

“UNEXPECTED ENCOURAGEMENT”

by Rom A. Pegram (7/30/17)

HOPE ... is an ingredient we need, as followers of Christ, in order to ‘hang in there’ in this life. The truth is, we live in a world that would just as soon persecute us or put us down, as thank us for the Christ-like lives we lead and the Christ-like love we share. Hope comes from a *confidence* in our faith in Christ ... and is sustained by a God-given *diligence* to persevere in this world—never allowing our faith to waver!

Someone once said (anonymous), “Let your feelings be your friend, but not your master.” In other words, don’t make major life decisions based on how you *feel* ... or how someone close to you feels ... in any given moment. Rather, make major life decisions based on ... what you *know* to be the truth—God’s word. Again, *hope comes from a confidence in our faith in Christ ... and is sustained by a God-given diligence to persevere in this world—never allowing our faith to waver...*

Today, we continue on in Hebrews, Chapter 6, but I first need to set up the scripture we’re going to today. *Let me begin with what was coming for Christians just a few years down the road...* Decius (A.D. 249-50) was the first Roman emperor to persecute Christians in a systematic manner, requiring that all show evidence of having sacrificed to the emperor. Many submitted, although others escaped either by means of bribery or through flight...

This was some years after the writing of the book of Hebrews—written to (2nd generation) Hebrew Christians, possibly contemplating a return to Judaism. Why? ‘Because they were being persecuted ... by Romans, as well as the religious Jews. Hebrews was probably written just before the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 A.D. It was close enough to this major event that the writing was probably on the wall; it was not going to be easy being a follower of Christ! *We must remember that this epistle (letter) was written during a period of growing persecution (12:4)*—though the persecution had not yet come full force. It’s in this context we need to read today’s section of the letter to the Hebrews. Listen carefully (Hebrews 6:9-12, NIV)...

“Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case--things that accompany salvation. ¹⁰ God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. ¹¹ We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. ¹² We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.”

Who of us hasn’t been persecuted for our faith? If not directly, then as a part of the Body of Christ as a whole. We’re supposed to live in a country that believes in religious freedom. Yet, more and more, it seems as though religious freedom is fought for for everyone ... except Christians...

- Kids are picked on in school if they express their faith in any way ... or are caught carrying a Bible, along with their other schoolbooks...
- Young professionals are called to task if they choose a different moral route than their superiors—siding with God’s guidelines from scripture...
- *Anything shoved in our face or down our throats that we know is not of God is ... persecution!*

But, scripture tells us that as we move toward ‘end times,’ when Jesus will come again, *persecution of our faith will only get worse and worse*. So, the writer of Hebrews may very well have been writing to us today. Here’s what we need to hang onto: Folks...

GOD WANTS US TO BE CONFIDENT IN OUR FAITH! Verses 9-10 tell us, “Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are *confident* of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation. ¹⁰ God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.”

Apparently, many of the 2nd generation Christians that Hebrews mentions, were slipping back to what they once knew—Judaism. *It kind of reminds me of the Apostle Peter after Jesus’ death. He wasn’t so sure about his faith anymore, since Jesus was now gone. So, what did he do? He went back to what he knew—what he was comfortable with ... fishing!*

Remember, many of the believers of this day (the Hebrew Christians who this letter was written to) were being persecuted for their faith; so, many were going back to Judaism, just to make their lives easier, to take the pressure of persecution off. What the author of Hebrews was basically saying was this: “Here’s what these guys are doing (the apostate), but ... **DON’T YOU BE ACTING THIS WAY! BE CONFIDENT IN YOUR FAITH** ... knowing that God will never leave you nor forsake you, just as his word promises us!”

And that’s the **GOOD NEWS** for us today, too! **GOD WANTS US TO BE CONFIDENT IN OUR FAITH!** God wants to give us *the gift of confidence ... so we never ever have to doubt God’s love for us ... or God’s ability to care for us*. Folks, let me remind you; God only wants his very best for you ... and you can see that clearly in the gift of Jesus! Here’s something else you need to see in our lesson today:

GOD WANTS US TO HAVE HOPE, AS WELL AS DILIGENCE! Verse 11 says, “We want each of you to show this same *diligence* to the very end, in order to make your *hope* sure.” **GOD DESIRES FOR YOU TO HAVE THE GIFT OF HOPE—AN ASSURANCE OF HOPE...**

Just prior to the section of Hebrews that I read to you today, the author is warning against those who are ‘apostate’—those who’ve run from the faith, who’ve fallen away from the faith. And sometimes, when we’re confronted with this warning, we think ... this could never happen to us. But it can...

Some years ago, my brother Stan lost a high school friend—one who'd been a real brother in Christ in the past. His name was Russ. Russ was a high school classmate of Stan's. He was a college classmate, too ... both of them attending Asbury College (a Bible college) in Kentucky. Russ met his future wife there. He came back to Neenah, Wisconsin and taught at the Middle School there for several years. Then, something happened ... and Russ stepped down from his teaching position. Apparently, there were some addictions in his life that he couldn't shake. A short time later, Russ took his own life. He's left behind many friends, a wife, and two sons—18 & 14 years old (at the time of his death)...

What you don't know is that Russ, apparently, was one who'd fallen away from the faith over the years. No longer was he that strong follower of Christ he'd been as a teenager and as a young adult at Asbury College. For a variety of reasons, he'd let go of the Church (the Body of Christ); he'd let go of God. And, along with that, he'd let go of all God offers us to 'hang in there' in this life ... including an 'assurance of hope!'

In speaking with my sister in Florida about what my brother Stan had been through at the time, she made a comment that really hit me. She said, "When Christians begin to take their own lives, something is seriously missing!" And, she's right. Now, I'm not going to claim to be a psychiatrist or an expert in suicide, but I do know that God's provision of HOPE keeps us mentally healthy in life, too! This world we live in is a hard world sometimes. And what's missing many times in these cases is that 'assurance of hope' God so desperately wants us to have—to help us not only cope with life, but get through it victoriously! Just as the believers in the days of Hebrews found out ... *it was not going to be easy being a follower of Christ!* Folks, today, you need to know this: ***When we let go of God ... we let go of God's provisions***, like the HOPE we need ... that keeps us stable in many ways! And along with HOPE...

GOD DESIRES FOR US TO HAVE THE GIFT OF DILIGENCE. It's been said, "Diligence flags when hope deteriorates." In other words, during those times when our hope meter is running a little bit low—due to the unrelenting pressures of life, the gift of *diligence* will kick in and carry us through! Diligence, folks, is an incredible gift of God! And, if you have both these gifts God wants you to have—*both hope and diligence*, then here's what you can expect: V. 12 (NLT) says,

"Then you will not become spiritually dull and indifferent. Instead, you will follow the example of those who are going to inherit God's promises because of their faith and endurance."

That's our goal, folks ... as followers of Christ! For those who hang on ... and keep believing in God's promises, *we will inherit those promises!* So, BE CONFIDENT IN YOUR FAITH! And ... ACCEPT GOD'S GIFT OF HOPE (ASSURANCE OF HOPE) ... AND GOD'S GIFT OF DILIGENCE! Remember, *if you let go of God, you let go of God's provisions!* God wants to help you 'hang in there' no matter what you are going through in life! *Even the most confusing, painful, and hopeless situations you can think of are no*

match for our God! BE CONFIDENT IN THAT ... and let God's provisions of HOPE & DILIGENCE carry you through...