

# **“Do not abandon that boldness of yours: continue the dream!”**

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**Hebrews 10:16-25, 35-39; Jeremiah 31:31-34**

**August 27, 2023 ~ Vista La Mesa Christian Church**

It is wonderful to be with you here on this special weekend of celebration! Thank you Rebecca for inviting me to be with you! I also want to thank our friend Steve Bridwell for hosting Sharon and me during our stay this weekend. We go way back. We're just sorry we're missing our dear friend Renee who's doing such important work for our church up in Oregon.

As I've thought about this occasion, I've been reflecting on a few verses from the book of Hebrews.

I'm an Old Testament scholar, so I'm getting a bit out of my lane with a New Testament book. And honestly, this particular book is theologically tricky to navigate. So it's not normally one of my go-to places for preaching.

But there are a few things in the verses I've chosen from Hebrews 10 that I think are worth pondering. I'm reading from the recently released New Revised Standard Updated Edition. Google it. It's a very good, substantive update with the best, most up-to-date scholarship available today.

I want to focus on two themes from these verses in Hebrews 10: the healing blood of Jesus and the ancient covenant we are called to uphold. I'll close with a few thoughts about what blood and covenant have to do with the exhortation toward the end of the chapter to “provoke one another to love and good deeds” and “not abandon that boldness of yours.”

Blood, covenant, and provocative boldness.

Our reading from Hebrews today begins with a quote from Jeremiah 31:

“This is the covenant that I will make with them, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds, and I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”

Hebrews 10:19-24 continues, “Therefore, my brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us... 22 let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith... [and] 23 hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering... 24 And let us consider how to PROVOKE one another to love and good deeds...”

I’m skipping down to v 35: “Do not, therefore, abandon that BOLDNESS of yours; it brings a great reward. 36 For you need endurance... 38 My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back... 39 But WE are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so preserve our souls.”

Blood, covenant, and persistent, provocative boldness.

The “blood of Jesus” in v 19 is a theme that has been used in powerful and sometimes problematic ways through the course of Christian history.

It references a historical reality — Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the Roman army. His blood was shed by the Empire.

His execution by crucifixion is significant. It says something important about how the Romans viewed Jesus and why they killed him.

Crucifixion was a means of public execution developed by the Roman army to terrorize and pacify populations prone to resist imperial rule. It was reserved for those the authorities decided had committed treason.

It did double duty, getting rid of trouble-makers and sending a powerful message to anybody else who might be thinking of following their lead. It was carried out in broad daylight, not in some hidden, dark prison somewhere. It was gruesome public theatre, a “demonstration killing” like

lynching in Jim Crow America or planes blowing up on TV in Putin's Russia. It was an act of state-sponsored terrorism.

The Roman army used such a heavy-handed tactic, because the imperial economy was a hard sell for those at the bottom of it. Rome's wealth and power was built on the slave labor of many to support the wealth and power of a connected few.

It depended on an interlocking series of hierarchies, with clear distinctions of power, prestige and social status — overlapping hierarchies of gender, ethnicity, and labor roles, that carefully distinguished male and female, rich and poor, enslaved and free. Those distinctions and hierarchies of status and worth were the building blocks imperial power. They were everywhere. And they were particularly evident in public meals and social events. They defined who could share meals, who could interact with whom in which places, in which rooms at which times.

The imperial political economy and its rules of social status and behavior was supported by an imperial theology that defined what was divinely “sanctified” and what was “unholy,” “unclean,” and therefore dangerous.

The state's official religion venerated and worshipped the Emperor as “the son of God,” the embodiment of divine power in the world, and thus gave imperial political economy theological sanction. This order of things was, the state religion said, “gods' will,” established in heaven for the prosperity and well being of the earth and all its inhabitants.

Resist that order, violate the boundaries set by the various hierarchies of status and power, and you not only committed treason, you committed blasphemy. You threatened the very fabric of creation, the order set up by the gods themselves for the stability and flourishing of the world and all its creatures.

But the imperial economy and social structure was oppressive to those on the lower end of the interlocking system of hierarchies. That oppression took a heavy physical and psychic toll on those at the bottom. It manifested in their minds and their bodies in a variety of ways: In diseases and injuries that festered due to lack of proper health care and nutritious food, lack of adequate clothing and shelter. In the psychic burden of living hungry and homeless or socially shunned because of your low place in the social hierarchy. It was enough to make you crazy, possessed by demons beyond your control.

And to make matters worse, ancient imperial theology was a “prosperity gospel” that said those who benefited from the system were obviously favored by the gods and morally superior, while those who lost out were obviously morally flawed and thus deserved what they got. So on top of everything else, you pile on pride, on the one hand, and guilt and self-doubt on the other.

It’s important to note in this context the particular features of Jesus’s ministry and message. He sat at table with “sinners” and “outcasts,” without regard to social status and physical condition. He healed the sick and cast out demons. In other words, he moved and worked among those hurt most by the rule of “the Empire” — the Greek word is *basileia*, “empire.” He worked to help heal their bodies and their minds, to mend the damage done to their spirits by the rules of the Roman *basileia*.

Alongside his healing ministry and his practical example of open table fellowship and indiscriminate association with “sinners” and social outcasts, Jesus preached an alternative way of living, by an alternative set of social-economic rules. He called it living according to “God’s rule.” In the Greek language of the gospels, the *basileia tou theou*, literally “the empire of God,” a none-too-subtle contrast to The *basileia*, “the empire of Rome.”

To illustrate the alternative rules of this *basileia tou theou*, Jesus told and acted out stories of lavish communal banquets open to all, of miraculous hauls of fish, of shared morsels that in the sharing became giant feasts,

and endless bread from small loaves willingly shared for the benefit of all at open tables where rank and status don't matter.

Such deeds and stories were counter-cultural. They violated the rules, the expectations, the hierarchies and distinctions of imperial rule. In his ministry and his message, Jesus not only violated those rules of status, he encouraged others to do so as well.

No wonder that the Roman authorities, when he came to their awareness, considered him to be a threat. And no wonder they arrested and killed him. Jesus was crucified, executed for high treason to get rid of him and to stop his seditious message from spreading.

But it backfired. Meant to demoralize his followers and discredit his preaching, his execution quickly came to express a profound theological truth for those who had been inspired by Jesus's teaching and healing ministry.

For them, Jesus' shed blood, his courageous solidarity with all who suffered under the rule of Rome, his willingness to march right into Jerusalem and keep preaching that message till the Romans arrested and executed him, was an act of defiance, a source of inspiration. It offered a ray of hope, the dawning fulfillment of an ancient biblical promise of a more just and bountiful world for all. It opened a pathway to healing the brokenness of a world suffering the impact of imperial rule.

That, I think, is what Hebrews 10:19 is getting at when it talks about the "confidence we now have to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus."

But this after-the-fact theological reflection on this terrible act of state terrorism can easily veer off into problematic terrain. And this is the tricky aspect of the argument in Hebrews.

Around the time this book was written, the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by the Roman general Titus and animal sacrifice which, in

Judaism, had pretty much been exclusively practiced in the temple had come to an end. Reflecting on that very recent, very shocking and transformative moment, the author reflects on the crucifixion of Jesus and describes it as the blood sacrifice to end all blood sacrifices.

It was a bold rhetorical-theological move, but it had a big potential pitfall. Later readers came to misunderstand the conceptual significance of animal sacrifice in the Hebrew tradition, thinking of it as a form of “appeasement,” religiously sanctioned killing to satisfy the bloodthirsty wrath of God. But normally in the Hebrew Bible, sacrifice is described, not as an “appeasement” offering, but as a ritual act of hospitality. The priestly representatives of the people are preparing and consuming a feast for an honored guest: God.

Typically in ancient Israel, families ate foods prepared with grains, beans, fruit, and vegetables, supplemented by milks and cheeses from small cattle. Sheep, goats and other farm animals were valued for providing wool and milk products and for pulling plows. On very special occasions, a family might slaughter an animal for meat. So Abraham, for example, is said to have killed a calf to provide a lavish meal for travelers (angels, it turns out), who show up at his tent one day. It was an extraordinary extravagance meant to show honor to the visitors who may or may not have been dangerous to his family. Better to be nice to strangers who might actually be powerful and important people than to risk offending them — and who knows what might happen then?

Scriptures that describe the central interior of the tabernacle, the tent-like structure that preceded the temple, and then the temple itself describe what is essentially a fancy kitchen. Ritual sacrifice in the tabernacle and temple is described as a meal between God and the priestly representatives of the people. Like Abraham slaughtering a calf to prepare an extravagant meal for travelers who might be foes, but who may well become friends over a tasty feast, “sacrifice” is an extravagant “fellowship meal” with God, complete with a rare dish of meat, a meal meant to keep the relationship between the people and God strong by periodically sitting down to dinner together.

Particularly in light of Jesus's ministry, message, and daily lifestyle, all of which centered on open tables and indiscriminate communal fellowship, I think that temple sacrifice as "hospitality meal" is a much more appropriate way than "appeasement" to understand the shed blood of Jesus in Hebrews.

And that's why we can have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus.

We can enter not because a blood-thirsty God has been satisfied and can now love worthless, filthy sinners like us.

God loves us and always has: clean or dirty, flawed or filthy, broken and battered or doin' just fine. God loves us every second of every day from the beginning of time to the end, because that's just what God does.

God hates it when we don't love each other. God hates it when we're greedy or cruel or so beat down and self-effacing that we just can't love ourselves and see our own value — or so self-absorbed that we don't see each other and tend to one another's needs. But make no mistake: God loves us and never stops.

The blood of Jesus was shed, not because God needed it to be able to love us, but because Rome demanded it for Jesus's scandalous ministry and message.

But what empire intended for evil, God transformed and sanctified for healing, life-giving love. What empire intended to quash a movement for justice, God intended to throw open the doors and invite everyone in, till no one leaves hungry or sick or broken-spirited.

Jesus died because Rome was scared of the message he was preaching, and the things he was doing, the social rules he was breaking.

But Rome's reactionary response backfired. Their attempt at suppression failed. The shed blood of Jesus didn't intimidate his followers into mute submission, it gave them inspiration, confidence and boldness. And it should do the same for us today.

They saw in Jesus's self-sacrifice, God's love and solidarity with human beings to such a ridiculously surprising extent as to share our pain and suffering, even unjust suffering to the point of death. God so loves us that God goes with us even there. It is that unflinching presence, that absolute solidarity and love that gives us now the confidence we need to act boldly, to provoke one another to love and good works.

At the beginning of our reading this morning, Hebrews cites Jeremiah 31:33 and implies that all of this is in some way a fulfillment of the ancient covenant God made with Israel. Jeremiah says that in his own time, centuries before Hebrews was written, God is making a "new covenant" with Israel.

"This is the covenant that I will make with them: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds."

Jeremiah is not arguing that the ancient covenant God made with Israel is flawed and outdated and now must be replaced with a new, improved covenant (or in the language of older English translations, a new "testament"). What's wrong is not the covenant itself. What's wrong is the attitude of the people toward that covenant. The people agreed to the covenant but their hearts weren't in it. God, Jeremiah says, is going to remedy that situation by writing the ancient covenant directly on their hearts and minds. It will become so ingrained as to become second nature. That's what's "new" in the covenant Jeremiah describes.

It's a covenant built on mutual love and care, on compassion and mercy, on social and economic and environmental justice for all, where the sick and vulnerable are cared for, where everyone has the food and shelter and clothing they need, where communities are empowered and whole, and

creation flourishes for the benefit and sustenance of all. It's a covenant rooted in the fundamental conviction that every single human being is created to be the very image of God, the sign of God's benevolent, abundant rule in the world. Therefore, every human being must be afforded utmost dignity, respect, and loving care.

Canceling debts, forgiving loans, freeing the enslaved, redistributing wealth and land and giving it periods of rest from agriculture and development — all these things outlined in the ancient covenant with Israel — God's covenant boils down to this: every single human being is created as the very image of God in the earth for the care of the earth and the flourishing of all its creatures— created as the very image of God, every single one of us!

Jeremiah says this ancient covenant of justice is “new” because God is now writing it on our hearts and minds.

This covenant, this daily demonstration of God's benevolent and compassionate love in the world, expressed with particular power in the life, death, and vindicating resurrection of Jesus, in his shed blood, in his solidarity with all human beings, especially the most vulnerable — this shed blood and life-giving covenant give us the boldness and courage we need to carry on God's transforming work of justice in our own world today.

We live in a very different world than that of Jeremiah and First Century Jews and Christians coming to terms with the shocking Roman destruction of the Jerusalem temple. Thank God, we live in a democracy — if we can keep it! We can petition our government to be sure its serving the needs of the people, especially the most vulnerable. We can protest and march and organize and vote. We can insist that we put the needs of people first, even as we encourage enterprising people to find new ways create meaningful work, with humane and just working conditions, and to care for the planet, our home. And we must take the responsibility to work every day for justice in our democracy and throughout the world. But demons remain that must be exorcised. Demons of lingering, persistent,

systemic racism, sexism, homophobia, fear of immigrants and people of different cultures.

But we who have confidence by the courageous example and the blood of Jesus must stand for the dignity and worth of all people and treat everyone with utmost respect and care. And by the example of Jesus, who dared to speak and act with courage and boldness, risking it all for the cause of God's rule in the world, we must provoke one another to love and good works. By the blood of Jesus, we can have confidence to work for justice.

So open your hearts and minds to God's world-changing covenant of justice. Live according to the rules of God's *basileia*. Be bold and endure! Don't shrink back!

Strengthened by the life-giving blood of Jesus, seek God's justice and do it, dream God's dream: Love yourself! Love your neighbor. And for God's sake, love the vulnerable people in your community and in the world around us. Love especially those who are economically or mentally or physically or spiritually having a hard time of it. Love them like you ought to love and take care of yourself and your own family.

Live with boldness. Don't shrink back. Endure and do not lose your way.

Provoke one another to love and good deeds!

In Jesus' name! Amen!