

Contend Earnestly

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The book of Hebrews, traditionally thought to be authored by the apostle Paul, was written around the year AD 63, a year or so before Nero's persecution began. Paul, weighing the signs both in Rome and in the church, knew that trouble approached, and the church was unprepared to face it. This epistle served as his attempt to stir God's people to renew their zeal and dedication.

The apostolic age was ending. In just a few years, the Romans would martyr both Peter and Paul, and the true church would begin to scatter as a result of persecution. Some elders still faithfully preached God's Word to the church, but many—even longtime members—were neglecting their wonderful calling. It seems that some were not really striving to study and comprehend God's way. They were relaxing their efforts in keeping His laws, Sabbath and holy days.

Perhaps they thought, "The Lord delays His coming. All things are as they were." Maybe the leadership of the church was changing, and the body, confused by it, was divided by slightly different beliefs. Whatever it was, their vision of God's purpose had been clouded or lost, and instead of being filled with excitement and zeal for God, members were letting down, endangering their salvation.

We can get the flavor of what Paul attempts to get across in Hebrews 2:1-3.

Therefore *we must give the more earnest heed* to the things which we have heard, *lest we drift away*. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we *neglect so great a salvation*?

He continues his theme in the next chapter:

"Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tested Me, proved Me, and saw My works forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways.' So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.'" Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief *in departing from the living God*. (Hebrews 3:8-12)

Also in chapter 4:

Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear *lest any of you seem to have come short of it*. . . . Let us therefore be diligent to enter into that rest, *lest anyone fall after the same example of disobedience*. (Hebrews 4:1, 11)

And again in Hebrews 5:12-14:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, *you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God*; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness,

for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

Paul wrote this epistle to people who had become feeble, frail, helpless, impotent, powerless and fragile concerning the ways of God. They had let down in keeping the laws of God and begun taking the mercy, grace and love of God for granted. These people were slowly losing their zeal for God. The era described in Hebrews sounds remarkably like the one we find ourselves in today.

Encouragement & Instruction

In Hebrews 10, Paul gives us much encouragement when he describes Jesus Christ, our High Priest:

For by one offering He has perfected *forever* those who are being sanctified. . . . "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their hearts, and in their minds I will write them," then He adds, "Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more." . . . Therefore, brethren, [we can have] boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus Christ. (verses 14, 16-17, 19)

Then, in Hebrews 10:22-25, he gives us five things to do both personally and collectively:

1. Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water. (verse 22)
2. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. (verse 23)
3. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, (verse 24)
4. not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some,
5. but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. (verse 25)

Let us draw near

God always encourages us to draw close to Him in prayer. Here Paul instructs us to do so with unwavering confidence, fullness of faith, without any doubt, because the sacrifice of Jesus Christ has cleared our conscience and paved the way into God's presence.

Today, some no longer feel the need to pray and study daily. They make the excuse that they do not have enough time. There is not enough time **NOT** to pray and study! The Day is approaching! Paul writes in Romans 13:11-14:

And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly. . . . But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.

If we fail to use these very vital tools of prayer and study—which will help us "walk properly" and "put on the Lord Jesus Christ"—we will find ourselves separated from God. That is the last thing we want as the Great Tribulation approaches!

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope

This is Paul's reason for writing the epistle. They were enduring great pressure to relax their standards. Some were beginning to return to their former beliefs and to the world. Apostasy had begun to set in.

Today in the confusion of the times, we can allow our foundations to be chipped away by listening to the myriad of differing opinions and beliefs. So many voices babble incessantly, each one trying to get our attention, that they can nearly drive us mad with confusion! Confusion not only affects what we believe, but also our zeal for God's way of life. It is imperative we "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

Jesus gives us this warning in His messages to the Thyatira, Sardis and Philadelphia churches:

But *hold fast* what you have till I come. . . . Remember therefore how you have received and heard; *hold fast* and repent. . . . Behold, I come quickly! *Hold fast* what you have, that no one may take your crown" (Revelation 2:25; 3:3, 11).

It is of paramount importance to keep a firm grip on the true teachings of God's Word.

Let us consider one another

Has there ever been a time in our calling when we need to excite one another for the work of God more than now? We all need to be motivated to "stand tall" in the Word of God. We ought to have great love for God's laws and each other. We should be performing the appropriate works attendant to our calling. In the greater church of God today, with its many differing attitudes, motivating to love and good works is very difficult to do.

Adam Clarke provides a paraphrase of Hebrews 10:24 that should help us to understand what Paul meant:

Let us diligently and attentively consider each other's trials, difficulties, and weaknesses; feel for each other, and excite each other to an increase of love to God and man; and as proof of it, to be fruitful in good works.

In reality, this is just another way of saying, as Jesus did, "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). Such love manifests itself, not only in feeling for others in their troubles, but also in edifying and encouraging each other to do what is godly. In this way, we share our burdens.

Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together

The Revised English Bible renders Hebrews 10:25: "We should not stay away from our meetings, as some do, but rather encourage one another, all the more because we see the day of the Lord drawing near." Since the New Testament church observed the Sabbath, it is evident that Paul is saying, "We need to be attending church services, especially since the end is coming soon!"

A good friend of mine and I were talking about how the church keeps the Sabbath. He commented that, generally, church members baptized before the mid-1970s seem to have a greater zeal for making sure they always get to services on the Sabbath than those baptized later.

This may or may not be true, but there does seem to be a trend not to consider assembling on the Sabbath as important as it used to be. In the past, we would never think of missing church services to attend a wedding or visit with family coming into town. We would never stay home because we were tired. When someone became ill, the whole family did not stay at home; we thought that everyone else should still go or at the very least one of us should represent the family at church. Since it was the most important event of the week, we would always plan to be at services, even if we "ruffled the feathers" of relatives or neighbors.

When first called, our family with our little children would drive thirty miles to Bible study on Friday nights, and the next morning, we would drive the same 60-mile round trip to go to services. In my thirty years as a member, I can hardly remember one of us not being at services each week. Later, we moved my mother to a cabin in the San Bernardino mountains, giving us a place to get away from it all occasionally. We would leave home before Sabbath started, early Friday evening, and return to our home Sunday night. But we would always make the 150-mile round trip back to services each Sabbath.

I am not trying to toot my own horn here, but to show how differently we considered the Sabbath and church services in earlier days. Paul implies that such a high regard for them is proper and very good for us. Why is it so important?

We obediently honor God in coming before Him at services. Each Sabbath is to be "a holy convocation" (Leviticus 23:3), meaning we are "called together" to worship Him. In a way, it is like a weekly Family reunion to pay homage to our Father, and in turn, He instructs us further in His way of life.

In addition, we partially fulfill some of the points we discussed above. The Sabbath allows us to draw near to God and strengthen our faith. It helps us to hold fast our belief in doctrine through the messages we hear. And through fellowship with the brethren, assembling on the Sabbath enables us to know and consider others' needs, showing us how we may aid them.

In the Church of the Great God, and in other churches of God, we have very few "large" congregations. Many number 50 or less. When five members are absent, 10% of the congregation is missing! It can be discouraging in a small congregation to have members absent, but it can be very encouraging to all when everyone really works to be there each week.

Are there reasons to stay home on the Sabbath? Of course. Personal or family sickness, as when a child is ill. Business trips and family vacations will interfere occasionally with attending services, but we can take tapes or articles and booklets. We may have put in an especially difficult, exhausting week, but even here, we can plan and prioritize to avoid these situations so we can attend services. In fact, having a difficult week is all the more reason to make sure we make it to Sabbath services.

Our former church affiliation says that keeping the Sabbath is just a tradition, not a law. It is interesting that the only part of the Bible that God did not inspire to be written by a human being is the Ten Commandments. God wrote them Himself with His own finger. He did this because the

commandments are His mind, the foundation upon which everything else stands. Thus, the keeping of the Sabbath is not a "tradition." It is a direct, eternally binding command of God, and thus we should do all we can never to forsake the assembling of ourselves on it.

Exhorting one another

Exhort means "to aid, help, comfort, encourage and beseech." In the Babylon of this world—with all its pulls and distractions to neglect our calling—every one of us needs exhortation to strive harder to stand.

We live in what can best be described as a Laodicean environment, just as did the Hebrews to whom Paul wrote. Many today challenge the foundation laid by God through Herbert Armstrong, and sadly, many call into question even the commandments of God. In such an atmosphere of doubt and distrust, we all need exhortation to be faithful in all we have learned.

In the next several verses, Paul pens a sober warning to us not to let down:

For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. . . . Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? . . . It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. . . . Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. . . . But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul. (Hebrews 10:26-27, 29, 31, 35, 39)

The apostle continues on to recount the heroic tales of our brethren who have gone on before us, standing through trials the likes of which we have never had to face. Then in Hebrews 12:1-2, he encourages us to settle down and run our race with patience and faith in God.

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith.

Now is the time to stir the embers, to fan the flame, to be zealous in our love and obedience to God, for the finish line is so much closer than when we began. Let's not give up with the goal in sight!