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Sermon Notes

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Joyful Liberation from the American Dream

Hebrews 10:32-35

No text in the NT has quite the same power to LIBERATE US from the domesticated, comfort-seeking, entertainment addicted version of Christianity so common in America... it has POWER TO FREE US from this counterfeit Christianity

Question before us: How can we be liberated from love for earthly comfort and prosperity so that we may serve Christ and love others with an astonishing faith-filled joy that is amazingly FREE FROM EARTHLY CONCERNS and SWEETLY HEAVENLY MINDED

I believe it was to produce this kind of person that the entire epistle was written to begin with:

JOYFULLY ACCEPTED THE CONFISCATION OF YOUR PROPERTY

BECAUSE YOU KNEW

YOU HAD BETTER AND LASTING POSSESSIONS

I. Our Context... and Theirs

A. Our Context

John Piper: “The Christian church in America suffers from about 350 years of dominance and prosperity”

- Dominance: From the first days of the Puritans in New England until now, being a Christian in America has been generally acceptable, in most cases profitable and beneficial in the eyes of the general population and society; no other religion has had anywhere near the influence of Christianity—not Islam, not Buddhism or Hinduism, not Judaism, not atheism... it has been Christianity more than any other religion that has been dominant in American culture
- Prosperity: Our Christian faith has enabled us to prosper in almost every way... we're used to things GOING WELL for us; because we are

Christians, we are delivered from the afflictions of drug and alcohol abuse, and generally from the wastefulness of laziness and poor work habits so that we have risen and risen in the world; our Christian ethics have made us generally likeable and acceptable to co-workers and neighbors; Christianity has generally made LIFE BETTER for American Christians

- Suffers: This situation has resulted in a completely unrealistic and unbiblical expectation on the part of many American Christians that our faith should in some way insulate us from the sufferings that are so common to our brothers and sisters around the world. Our comfortable relationship with the surrounding world—government, the majority of the populace, American culture—has made the American church ANEMIC... we are weakened by the expectation of a comfortable successful life
- We are likely to think, “If things don’t go better for us because of our Christian faith, WHAT’S THE POINT IN BEING A CHRISTIAN

In the definition of the American Dream by [James Truslow Adams](#) in 1931, "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" regardless of [social class](#) or circumstances of birth

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this... but we MUST note from Scripture that it is NOT EXPECTED of the normal Christian life; actually the Scripture teaches precisely the opposite

B. Their Context

1. Jewish people who had made an outward profession of faith in Christ
2. Initially had stood courageously for Christ even in the face of strong persecution (more about that in a moment!)
3. Now were strongly tempted to turn their backs on Christ... to drift away from Him, or turn away or fall away... to return to the comfort of Old Covenant Judaism

C. The Context in Hebrews

1. To remedy this, the Author shows them the GLORIOUS SUPREMACY of Jesus Christ and of the New Covenant
2. The Superiority of Christ

Hebrews 1:3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Hebrews 1:4 So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

Superior to angels, to Old Testament Prophets, to Moses, to Joshua, to Abraham and to Levi

3. The Superiority of Christ's Priestly Ministry

- a. Levitical priests were all sinners who died; Christ is sinless who lives forever
- b. Levitical priests serve at a manmade, earthly sanctuary; Christ serves in the true sanctuary in heaven
- c. Levitical priests offer the blood of bulls and goats which can never take away sin, and they do it day after day, year after year; Christ offered Himself ONCE FOR ALL TIME, and now sits at the right hand of Almighty God

4. The Superiority of the New Covenant

Hebrews 8:10-12 I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ¹¹ No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. ¹² For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.

5. Culmination in Hebrews 10:

- a. All the advantages of the New Covenant

Hebrews 10:19-22 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God,

²² ...a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

- b. A series of exhortations
 - i) Let us draw near to God in full assurance of faith
 - ii) Let us hold unswervingly to our hope
 - iii) Let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together

iv) Let us provoke one another to love and good deeds

v) Let us encourage one another daily

c. A stern warning against apostasy

Hebrews 10:30-31 For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." ³¹ It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

d. NOW: a call for them to remember their own past in Christ

II. The Centerpiece: Joyfully Suffering for Christ

Hebrews 10:34 You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.

A. What Happened: Hebrew Christians Were Persecuted Harshly

1. In first century, Christianity was fought immediately by the Jewish authorities; eventually and intermittently by the Romans

Hebrews 10:32 you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering.

2. Author says they “STOOD THEIR GROUND” (NIV) or simply “endured”... they didn’t give in, they held onto their Christian profession during the trial
3. The Author calls it a “GREAT CONTEST IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING”... or KJV gives us a “GREAT FIGHT OF AFFLICTIONS”
 - a. The word “fight” is “ATHLEISIS” from which we get the word “athlete”... a battle in the arena, a wrestling match with a bitter foe,
 - b. The word is intensified with an extra Greek word... it was a GREAT fight... a powerful battle
 - c. The word “afflictions” refers to anything that causes pain and suffering; it could be physical pain (like a beating with rods) or emotional pain (like insults or rejection by people) or economic pain (like having your shop boycotted because you were a Christian so that you become impoverished
4. The Author does not leave us in the dark about what it was:

Vs. 33 Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated.

- a. PUBLIC exposure... the shame and humiliation of mass rejection by neighbors and fellow citizens

- b. The Greek word is “**qeatri,zw**” the same root as “theater”...the idea is that they were all gaped at and gawked at and mocked and scorned and perhaps pelted with dirt
 - c. Insult and persecution
 - d. In any case... a VARIETY of sufferings... not all of one kind
5. Furthermore, not everyone underwent the same thing... some people were singled out and persecuted... others voluntarily went and STOOD SIDE BY SIDE with them and bore the shame and reproach they did
- a. This took great courage... when a crowd is shunning someone, to stand up for that person and defend them means the same abuse will be heaped on you
 - b. The Greek word is “koinonos” meaning partaker or having fellowship... but here it is a matter of suffering
 - c. But the trial went FAR DEEPER than that...
6. Imprisonment

Hebrews 10:34 You sympathized with those in prison

- a. At some point, it’s obvious that their shining of the light of Christ offended enough people that some laws were enacted against them... or perhaps some false accusations were lodged against them
- b. First Century Christians accused of ridiculous things
 - i) Being “atheists” because they didn’t believe in the pagan deities
 - ii) Being revolutionaries against Caesar because they followed King Jesus
 - iii) Being cannibals because in the Lord’s Supper they ate the bread and drank the cup symbolizing the body and blood of Christ
 - iv) Being incestuous because of their emphasis on loving the brothers and sisters
- c. At any rate, for much of the first three centuries of its existence, Christianity was ILLEGAL; and at some point, some of these specific Christians were imprisoned for their faith
- d. AND first century prisons were HORRIBLE places
- e. Nothing like the modern prisons which seek to uphold the Bill of Rights’ Eighth Amendment’s prohibition of “cruel and unusual punishments”

- f. There would be very little light, wretched hygiene, no hope of a speedy trial, stench beyond imagination; but worst of all, no provision for food!! If prisoners were to be fed a healthy diet in a regular pattern, family and friends of the prisoners were responsible
- g. The problem with that: it was often the government's way of smoking out the other Christians

B. Courageous Compassion

1. Imagine the courage it took for the Christians who WEREN'T arrested to "sympathize" with those IN prison
2. What was the situation?
 - a. Perhaps the church was divided into multiple smaller house churches
 - b. The authorities had the names and addresses of only SOME of the Christians in their district or region and one terrible night, they flooded in and arrested all the ones in those cell groups
 - c. The rest of the church in that city now had a major problem: their brothers and sisters were arrested and being persecuted... they would need food and clothing and perhaps medical care; Christian love and compassion would require that the free Christians should come and care for their imprisoned Christian family; BUT if they DID SO, the authorities would assume they were Christians as well and arrest them too
 - d. BUT in the earlier days, these Hebrew Christians BY FAITH courageously stood side by side with those in prison

C. Results: Actual Suffering

1. Insults... public exposure... threats... physical pain... AND
2. Confiscation of property
 - a. Confiscation = seizure
 - b. One of two causes
 - c. Either the government SEIZED the property of known Christians
 - d. OR a crazed mob came and took what they wanted and burned the rest to the ground
3. In either case, they lost their property
 - a. Their precious home was gone...

- b. Keepsakes and mementos were gone
- c. Their valuables were gone
- d. They were now homeless... depending on the charity of others for their sustenance

D. How They Reacted

1. They ACCEPTED it JOYFULLY
2. Accepted
 - a. Greek word for “Accepted” is sometimes translated “welcomed”; it is used of the acceptance given a trusted messenger upon his arrival, or even the expectancy all Christians have for the Second Coming of Christ... these Hebrew Christians even seemed to welcome the news of the plundering of their property as though it were something good; far from fighting it, they ACCEPTED IT as given from the hand of a loving Father
3. JOYFULLY: they went far beyond mere stoic acceptance; they actually rejoiced in it!!!
 - a. Supernatural reaction... beyond anything that a normal person could do
 - b. Understanding this JOY is the key to a fruitful Christian life
 - c. Let’s probe the roots of it

E. What These Hebrew Christians Believed

Hebrews 10:34 ...because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.

Or more accurately:

^{ESV} Hebrews 10:34 ... since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

1. A HEAVENLY perspective
2. What is this BETTER possession? What is this ABIDING one
3. It is the reward of the Gospel... GOD HIMSELF and the ETERNAL CITY/WORLD to which the Gospel brings us
4. God is the ultimate reward

Hebrews 11:6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

Psalm 73:25 Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

Revelation 21:3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

^{ESV} Psalm 16:11 You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

- a. To some degree, Psalm 16:11 IS the partner verse to Hebrews 10:34
- b. To be in the presence of God, in face to face fellowship with Him is a BETTER possession than anything earth can give
 - i) “Better” possession = “fullness of joy”
- c. And it is an ABIDING or ETERNAL possession... for heaven is eternal

at your right hand are pleasures FOREVERMORE.

- 5. ALSO: The city/country is prominently mentioned
 - a. Our “possessions” are those things which we own, and where we live
 - b. Hebrews also holds out a solid hope for a lasting home which is beautiful and filled with good things: the beautiful, eternal CITY OF GOD, the NEW JERUSALEM
 - c. This present world is TEMPORORAY... that one is ETERNAL

Hebrews 13:14 For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

- 6. Hebrews 11:13-16 sums up their attitude

Hebrews 11:13-16 All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. ¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country-- a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

F. Supernatural Joy is Part of Saving Faith

1. Joy at selling all earthly things to gain a heavenly inheritance

Matthew 13:44 *The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.*

2. Joy in the midst of severe trials of many kinds that sanctify us

James 1:2-4 *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

3. Joy at the rewards that come when specifically persecuted for Christ

Matthew 5:11-12 *"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

4. Joy at being counted worthy of suffering for the sake of Christ

Acts 5:41 *The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.*

5. Joy like Jesus' joy on the cross

Hebrews 12:2 *who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

III. God's Counsel to Them Who Were Actively Persecuted

^{ESV} Hebrews 10:32 *But remember the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings*

A. Remember...

1. This is consistently a part of the remedy for people who are drifting away
2. Look at the examples:
 - a. Reclaiming a sinful Peter

Mark 14:72 *Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept.*

b. Reclaiming the idolatrous Jews

Jeremiah 2:2-3 Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown. ³ Israel was holy to the LORD, the firstfruits of his harvest

c. Reclaiming the church at Ephesus

Revelation 2:4-5 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. ⁵ Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.

3. REMEMBER how it used to be with Jesus
4. Remember the zeal and joy of your first days as Christians

B. Remember Your Enlightenment

1. Greek word is “**fwtizw**”
2. The word is related to “light” (from which we get “photography” and “photosynthesis” and “photon”)
3. The word is used two general ways in the NT
4. First: a spiritual light that enables you to see spiritual truth more clearly

Ephesians 1:18-19 I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

5. Second: a transformation from within that allows you to shine more brightly for Christ

Revelation 18:1 After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor.

Ephesians 5:8-9 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light ⁹ (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)

6. The word is often used for CONVERSION, for being born again

C. BOTH are Probably in View Here

1. The Hebrews had received the truth of the gospel, had understood it... had perceived the LIGHT of Christ and received it
2. Christ had gone from being darkness to them to being the God of Light which He really is... the LIGHT of the world
3. Having received this heart enlightenment, they then began to live boldly for Christ... to shine the light of Christ

D. Two Opposite Outcomes of Shining the Light... both in Matthew 5

1. People respond well and see God in what you do:

Matthew 5:16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

2. People respond poorly and hate you and persecute you:

Matthew 5:11-12 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

E. Remember Your Suffering

F. Remember Your Courageous Loyalty

G. Remember Your Joyful Acceptance of the Plundering of your Possessions

H. Remember Your Faith-filled Knowledge: You have an ABIDING CITY

I. Summary: Do Not Throw Away Your Confidence

Hebrews 10:35 So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.

IV. God's Counsel to Us Who Are Not Actively Persecuted

A. Understand Our Context

1. Most American Christians do not face the confiscation of their property because of their faith in Jesus
2. The most faithful evangelists and counter-cultural witnesses suffer some persecution: insults, rejection, loss of income by getting by-assed at work, ridicule in school or in popular media, occasionally some physical abuse in extreme situations and that's it

3. BUT Christians in many parts of the world are suffering these exact things: standing their ground in a great contest in the face of suffering—imprisonment, confiscation of property, physical torture and death

B. Assess Yourself by this Passage

1. FIRST and FOREMOST: Do you have a BETTER and LASTING INHERITANCE??
 - a. Are you a Christian?
 - b. Have you trusted in Christ at all? Because this passage speaks no word of comfort to a non-Christian
 - c. Repent and believe in Christ!!! And you will have the better and lasting possession!!
2. Have You Been Corrupted by the American Dream?
 - a. We are in a white water river, with a constant pull on us to live for comforts, pleasures, things money can buy
 - b. We measure “a good day” in the pattern of the American Dream—good times, good food, pretty sights, comfortable experiences
 - c. We are constantly barraged with the American Lie that

“A man’s life DOES consist in the abundance of his possessions”

- d. If you believe that, then it will be impossible for you to JOYFULLY ACCEPT the confiscation of your property
- e. Rather, you will FIGHT TO PROTECT your property and do very little for the Kingdom of Christ
- f. You will RISK NOTHING for Jesus...
 - i) You will value your reputation at work too much to share Christ with your boss or coworker
 - ii) You will value your fun at a family reunion picnic too much to share Christ with a lost cousin
 - iii) You will value your weekend hobby (golf, hunting, antique shopping) too much to get involved in a church outreach
 - iv) You will value your health too much to risk it on a mission trip to Haiti

- v) You will value your retirement portfolio too much to give sacrificially to missions
 - vi) You will value your time too much to help the urban poor at the Durham Rescue Mission or in our Jobs for Life ministry
 - g. The whole point of the Book of Hebrews is to produce people who will JOYFULLY lose earthly benefits for the sake of Christ because YOU KNOW that you have a better, eternal possession
3. Do You Know That You Have a Better, Eternal Possession?
- a. Are you convinced that God is most certainly your heavenly reward?
 - b. Are you convinced from Scripture that heavenly fellowship with God will be a reward that far outweighs anything you could possibly give up for Christ?
 - c. Do you believe the descriptions of Revelation 21-22... a gloriously radiant city, glowing with the glory of Christ, of unspeakable beauty, a place where there is no more death, mourning, crying, pain
 - d. Do you believe that nothing on earth that you could suffer could remotely compare with the heavenly rewards you will get
4. Are You Living for that Heavenly Possession?
- a. Are you increasingly learning to deny present earthly happiness for the sake of Christ's Kingdom?
 - b. Are you increasingly giving of yourself—your time, money, possessions, plans—in a way that makes no sense to unsaved people?
 - c. Are you investing in eternity, longing for heaven?
 - d. IF NOT, Hebrews 11 is for you!!
5. Will You Feel Gypped if Years or Possessions Are Taken?
- a. To be “gypped” means to be cheated or swindled from something that is rightfully yours
 - b. Some Christians mourn like unbelievers when a Christian loved one dies young or is suddenly seized from life... the feeling is of some great tragedy as though the person has been GYPPEd from
 - c. Another image: a bride at the altar and her bridegroom breaks all his promises and jilts her... she is left standing there in her wedding dress, all

the guests shocked... some Christians look on a sudden loss for the sake of Christ as though they are being jilted by life or even worse by GOD

6. Is Your Heart Still as Strong After Jesus as When You Were First Enlightened?

- a. Remember your EARLIER DAYS... how it was when you first came to Christ
- b. Remember the dreams you had for your Christian life... all the great things you wanted to achieve for His Kingdom and His glory
- c. Remember the joy you had in heaven... the excitement you had when you contemplated your heavenly rewards
- d. Remember how full your heart was of the spiritual world, and how dead the secular world looked at that time

C. Repent As Needed

1. If you have left your first love... the joy you had in Christ and His Kingdom, and traded it in for a nominal Christian life that is very little different from the non-Christian neighbors and co-workers and relatives, then REPENT
2. This passage challenges us to JOYFULLY ACCEPT earthly loss based on our faith
3. TAKE RISKS for Jesus!!
 - a. Take risks for Christ in evangelism
 - b. Take risks for Christ in lifestyle
 - c. Take risks for Christ in how you spend your money

D. Pray for Contemporaries Who Are Suffering

1. Though American Christians aren't being imprisoned and tortured for the gospel, our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world ARE
2. In IRAN... **Youcef Nadarkhani, an Iranian pastor who may be executed any day now if he continues to refuse to recant his faith in court.**
 - a. Arrested in October of 2009 for opposing the education practice that forces non-Muslim children to read the Quran in school
 - b. Charged with apostasy from Islam, he was condemned to death on September 22, 2010

- c. Pastor Youcef says he was never a Muslim, and can't be charged with apostasy... but the Iranian courts say that because his parents were Muslims, he is legally considered a Muslim and has apostasized!
- d. Pastor Youcef could be executed any day now
- e. Pray for him!
- f. Listen to him! He wrote from Laka prison last June:

"Many attempt to flee from their spiritual tests... [but] no one will be victorious by escaping from them, but with patience and humility he will be able to overcome all the tests and gain victory," "Although heaven and earth will fade, His word will still remain."

- 3. Many agencies focus on the plight of Persecuted Christians around the world
 - a. Inform yourself
 - b. Pray
 - c. Act and advocate

E. Feed Your Faith

- 1. Be vigorous in faith by reading the promises of the gospel
- 2. Feed your heart DAILY on the beauties of the New Jerusalem and the New Heavens and New Earth to which you are going
- 3. Convince yourself of these facts:

Romans 8:18 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

2 Corinthians 4:17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

F. Suffer Well in Trials Common to Christians and Non-Christians

- 1. Illness... pain... loneliness at the death of a loved one
- 2. Financial trials...
- 3. Practice well during these trials for the trials that come because your ARE a Christian

G. Be Willing to Suffer as a Witness for Christ

1. Because of your faith in Jesus, be willing to be ostracized and publicly humiliated as a Christian
2. Open your mouth and share the gospel
3. Open your home and invite people in for the purpose of outreach
4. Speak your convictions on the hot controversies of the day that are relevant to the gospel: ABORTION, HOMOSEXUALITY, the EXCLUSIVITY of Christ
5. Live openly for Jesus and you WILL be persecuted

2 Timothy 3:12 In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted

H. Prepare for a Change

1. Persecution may very well be coming more and more in America
2. President Obama says America is NOT a Christian nation... I understand what he means in one sense but mean it very differently... the Christian faith was more respected by popular culture and Christianity was generally held in esteem
3. THAT IS ALL CHANGING!!! I foresee harder and harder times ahead for Christians in America
4. Prepare yourself AND your children for persecution in the future