

Anglican Church of Noosa
JESUS – Greater Than – Persevere in the Faith
Hebrews 10:19-31
Rev'd Brad Henley

Wow! “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” That final verse really packs a punch. It reminds me of a sermon preached by the American preacher Jonathan Edwards. Around the time of the Great Awakening in 1741 he preached a sermon titled, “Sinners in the hands of an Angry God.” Some people credit his sermon as the catalyst that started the First Great Awakening when many people returned to God. Now, I believe that sermons are written for a context, for a particular culture, time and place, and I think it is particularly so with this one. I don’t know whether God worked powerfully around that time because of Edwards’ sermon or in spite of it. It is impossible for us to know. But I know that that particular sermon is not for this time, place and context, spiritually or culturally. By all reports Edwards was a calm and restrained preacher most of the time and apparently, he read this sermon in a quiet unassuming manner. So, if anything, it wasn’t the style of His preaching that fired up the people to respond, but I believe many different factors came together at that time that led to the Great Awakening when people returned to God, repenting of their sins and followed Jesus with renewed passion, commitment and discipleship.

The Bible says clearly that it is God’s kindness that leads us to repentance. So, I suspect that rather than saying Edwards’ sermon was the catalyst for the Great Awakening, it might be more accurate to say that God moved powerfully in that area while Edwards was the pastor. If God worked through Edwards’ famous sermon, “Sinners in The Hands of An Angry God”, I think it shows that it is God’s grace that brings about revival, not a particular preacher or sermon. In the sermon Edwards seems to major on the anger and wrath of God and minor on the kindness of God. God is love, and all of God’s activity is loving. God’s love is worked out in righteous anger and wrath against evil, but to preach primarily of wrath and anger with occasional mentions of God’s kindness seems to be directed at trying to scare people into heaven.

By contrast, the Bible says in Romans 2:4, “it is God’s kindness that leads us to repentance.” With God, there is justice, judgement of sin, and the certainty that all things will be set right. And God’s justice, judgement, and conviction of sin comes in the context of his kindness, grace and love.

Now, moving to today’s final verse which shares some similarities with Edwards’ sermon title. “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

I want to approach this verse through a couple of stories from history. The first is from Isaiah. Isaiah was called by God to be a prophet, to speak out God’s truth to the people of his time. When God called Isaiah, he gave Isaiah a vision of magnificent splendour. He revealed a glimpse of His greatness and Isaiah was overcome with the experience.

“Woe to me!” He cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

When Isaiah was confronted with God’s presence, with seeing the King, he immediately saw the wretchedness of his own life. He saw that he didn’t have a purity, or holiness of his own. He saw that his speech was not worthy of such an exalted God of purity, holiness, and glory. And rightly so, Isaiah admitted his brokenness and sin before God.

Isaiah had a healthy fear of God when he was confronted with God's presence. But the very next thing that God does is deal with Isaiah's fear. God has one of His heavenly beings bring a coal from the altar, touch Isaiah at the point of his most guilt, on the lips, and takes away his guilt.

The second story I want to share is from one of Jesus' closest disciples - the one who calls himself, the disciple Jesus loved. John knew Jesus well. He knew he was loved by Jesus. He knew that he was chosen and called to share the good news of Jesus and he did so for many years. When God took John through a vision-like experience to meet with Jesus later in life John had a similar experience of fear to Isaiah. Here was someone who absolutely knew he was loved by Jesus, who had failed and sinned, yet who knew he was forgiven, and Revelation 1:17 says, "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead." One of Jesus' closest friends, when confronted with His greatness, fell as though dead at His feet. There is a right way to fear God, to recognise Jesus' greatness and give him the honour, respect and awe that is His due. But if we continue reading in either of these stories, what happens next? God says, "Don't fear." The verse continues, "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said, 'Do not be afraid.'"

Many times, the Angel of the Lord, a word or messenger of God appears to people in the Bible and the people are overcome with fear. But the first thing God says and does in these encounters is to deal with their fear: "Don't be afraid", He says, "Let me deal with your sin so that you can draw near." So, when we read, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." It is in fact only a dreadful thing if we insist on trying to deal with our own sin.

Like Isaiah and John, when confronted with Jesus' greatness, we will, no doubt, be overcome, but rightly so, and in the best of ways. We will experience that fear, wonder, awe and incredible gratitude that Jesus has in fact dealt with our sin on the cross.

As we've moved through the book of Hebrews that message that Jesus is greater, that with Him is the fullness of forgiveness, with Him is greater access to the God who made us and loves us, that message comes through again and again. And today it culminates with the application. Why do we spend this time thinking about the covenant, the blood of the sacrifice, the Old Testament priesthood and seeing that Jesus is greater? Because it leads us to worship. So, brothers and sisters, now you have confidence to draw near through Jesus' sacrifice. So, let us draw near to God. Let us worship Him, with the full assurance that Jesus brings. His blood poured out brings forgiveness, the washing with pure water and rebirth signified by baptism, the temple curtain torn in two, all point to the fact that we have access to God that is unprecedented in history until Jesus completed His work on the cross. So, now that we have a vision of the greatness of Jesus, that He holds firmly onto us, that He is faithful. Then we can respond, and v23 hold on to him.

I picture it like a three-year-old holding the hand of their Mum or Dad as they go out into the world. The parent knows a whole lot more about how the world works, about the dangers and delights of life, and the parent holds on firmly to their child as they cross the road or move about through a busy fair. The child has a small insight into what's going on but it's because they are held by their parent that they feel safe and secure. And rightly so. God has a whole lot more wisdom and insight than we will ever have, so when He holds faithfully on to us, then we can cling on to Him as faithfully as we can.

The author moves straight into the following verse encouraging believers to continue meeting together. In their context there was emerging persecution of believers. They had legitimate fears of being beaten, imprisoned or killed for meeting together. In our time people might miss worship because it's at an inconvenient time, the weather doesn't suit that week, or there might be sport on at the same time. In a much more difficult context than ours the author says, "Don't give up

meeting together.” ‘When you meet together, each one of you has something encouraging to contribute.’ God is working through each one of us to spur each other on to love and good deeds.

The final section of the passage addresses those who have been a part of the church but have fallen away. After receiving the truth of Jesus, that He is the greater sacrifice, the greater High Priest, the One who truly deals with sin and allows us access to our glorious, loving Father ... how can anyone turn away from Jesus and not love him?

For those who insult God, who repeatedly harden their hearts towards him, who refuse His love and forgiveness, it is a dreadful thing to meet Him.

The thing is, that for those who rightly fear God, there is nothing else in all creation we need to fear. If we fear God, giving Him the reverence, respect and awe that is His due then we don't need to fear anything else. Persecution? Sickness? Other powers? Other so called 'gods'? Death? Romans 8 (31) says, 'If God is for us, then who or what can be against us?'

See, the fear of God leads to life, in all its fullness. Proverbs 19.23 the fear of the Lord leads to life.

'God wants you to fear Him, because that's going to lead you to a life that you've never had, and it's a better life ... It's a secure life ... It's the life we were created for.' (Francis Chan)

When we rightly fear God, giving Him the reverence, respect and worship He deserves, then we realise that nothing else in all of creation needs to make us afraid. In other words, the right fear of God drives out every other fear.

So, you see, now we can enter boldly into God's presence. Not in our own strength, not fearfully in the despair of hell, but confidently in the assurance of the love of Jesus. So, let us draw near to God, come boldly into His presence and worship Him for who He is, for what He has done for us in Jesus. Let's draw near to Him now in prayer.