

Never Give Up!

Rich Nathan
June 1 & 2, 2019
Never Give Up
Hebrews 1

I want to take you back in time nearly 2,000 years ago to a hot summer evening in Rome. On the night of July 18 and 19 in 64 A.D., a fire broke out at a chariot racetrack called “The Circus Maximus”. Shops that surrounded the racetrack were filled with combustible materials and they caught fire. Then the wind picked up and the fire raged for five days, burning half the city of Rome to the ground.

The Roman Emperor, Nero, was vacationing at the time in his hometown of Antium on the Italian coast. He rushed back and tried to help the victims of the fire, but rumors erupted that Nero had set the fire in order to rebuild the city according to his own plans.

Tired of having the finger pointed at him, he decided to scapegoat Christians. An ancient Roman historian named Tacitus said this:

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Their [the Christians’] execution was made a matter of sport: some were sewn up in the skins of wild beasts and savaged to death by dogs; others were fastened to crosses as living torches, to serve as lights when daylight failed... A huge multitude was convicted, not so much of the ground of fire setting as for hatred of the human race.

Christians were seen by the general public as anti-social because they wouldn’t engage in emperor worship, they wouldn’t make sacrifices to him. So Christians in ancient Rome were easy scapegoats for the city’s anger arising from the fire.

Now, there were in Rome, at the time, a number of early Christian churches. When you think of a church in the New Testament period, you shouldn’t think of Vineyard Columbus – a megachurch with a large parking lot and a café – or even an old country church with the white steeple and a cross on top that your grandmother attended down in Circleville.

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Picture of church

There were no church buildings set up exclusively for Christian worship gatherings back in the first century.

When you think of the New Testament church, you ought to think of small groups or home fellowship groups – 15 to 20 people gathered in someone’s home to worship and pray and share the Lord’s table and scripture together; typically involving a family with a few relatives, maybe several neighbors and a couple of employees.

In Rome at the time, there was a network of these house churches, several of which were populated by Jewish believers in Jesus.

Now, in 64 A.D. when the fire broke out, Judaism was an officially recognized religion in Rome, entitled to some level of legal protection. Christianity was not. In fact, Christianity was viewed as a philosophy, and an illegal one at that. There was no freedom of religion in ancient Rome. Christians could be discriminated against with total impunity.

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The consequence of persecution

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The temptation to give up

So, here’s what I believe the setting is to the book of Hebrews that we’ll be studying over the course of the summer. As it became increasingly dangerous to be associated with Christianity, many Jewish Christians in these house churches were tempted to throw in the towel and go back to Judaism. Their lives were in danger. Their property was being taken. Their families were threatened. Why not just give up and go back to simply being Jews and not choose to believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

There’s a great contemporary analogy to the situation of the Jewish believers in Rome. China, under the Communist Dictator Xi Jinping, has ramped up its attack on unofficial churches. There are tens of millions of Chinese Christians who attend unregistered, so-called underground churches. So, what President Xi and the Communist Party are currently doing is coming down hard on these unregistered churches. They want churches to install security cameras in the pulpit which would allow Chinese officials to use facial scanning technology to learn the identity of every church attendee.

The Chinese government over the last few years has been shutting churches down. Even megachurches in the capital city of Beijing, churches that are the size of Vineyard Columbus have been shut down. Bibles have been confiscated. Crosses are routinely removed from the churches. Many church buildings have been demolished. Pastors and church leaders have been thrown in prison. Church members have been fired from their jobs. And the children of Christians who attend unregistered churches have been denied admission to university.

Under this pressure from the government, many Chinese Christians have been tempted to give up, to not publicly identify with Christianity or to drop out of these unregistered churches and only attend government sanctioned churches.

You know, in every age and in every nation, the world has used whatever means of social control are at its disposal to force followers of Jesus back in line. When the country is a religious or political dictatorship – churches may be closed, followers of Jesus may be jailed, tortured or even put to death. If the country offers some sort of legal protection – the pressure may be social or economic – you won't get a promotion at your job or you may be denied tenure at a university or you may be kept from being hired if you're known to be a committed Christian. You may be made fun of in your school or on your team. You may be slandered or verbally abused. Some people whose opinions matter to you may shun you. The dominant culture hates when people don't march in step with its values. That is the spirit of every age and every country.

The book of Hebrews is written to encourage Christians to never give up, even under the most severe pressure. That's the title of this summer's series in the book of Hebrews, "Never Give Up", and that's the title of today's message. Let's pray.

Slide Hebrews 1:1-4

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. 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. ⁴ So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

This is Recognition Weekend here at Vineyard Columbus. We're recognizing young people in our congregation who are transitioning from elementary school to middle school, middle schoolers who are going to high school, and high schoolers who have just graduated.

I want to say a word to students and parents and family members who are here for this recognition. Listen to me now. There's nothing more important in life and more crucial to your future success than having Jesus Christ in the center of your life and discovering his will for your life. You can never come up with a plan for your life, no matter what your plan is, that's better than God's plan!

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The strengthening of faith

But what will keep you following Jesus, not only as a middle schooler or a high schooler and on into your 20's and 30's and 40's? I want to share with you a study that was done several years ago of young adults here in America. It was conducted by Christian Smith who is one of America's leading sociologists of religion. A few years ago, he wrote a book called *Souls in Transition*.

In that book, Christian Smith listed the factors that keep young adults continuing on in the faith into their 20's and beyond. Why do some young people stick to the Christian faith? Why do some young people keep going to church, keeping following the Lord, while others give up? Christian Smith discovered that there are four top factors for why some young adults stick. If these four things were true of you as a teenager, it's more likely than not that you will continue on in faith into your 20's and 30's.

Here are the top factors:

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- Frequent personal prayer [As a teen, you regularly prayed]
- Strong parental religion [parents were deeply committed to church and regularly attended services and professed the importance of faith during your teenage years]
- Importance of religious faith [as a teenager, your faith was central to the way that you did life in middle school and high school]
- Had religious experiences [as a teenager, you made a commitment to Jesus and/or you experienced a miracle, you experienced prayers answered, you had a powerful spiritual experience]

These are the four top factors that keep kids in the faith.

Not as important as these top factors, but still very important, was the following factor:

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- Made fun of for religious faith

In other words, as a young person, you've been made fun of by peers for your faith. We parents hate to see their kids experience any stress. We definitely don't want to see our kids made fun of for any reason. But it's interesting that one of the factors that leads to long-term perseverance in Christian faith is having been made fun of as a young adult. There's something incredibly strengthening for a teenager's spiritual muscles, indeed for all of our spiritual muscles, when we experience push back and opposition because of our faith in Jesus.

You know, when I came to Jesus, I experienced extreme rejection from my parents – my dad literally cursed me out. My mother and sisters yelled at me. My best friend

dropped me. The rest of my friends basically dropped me. A college professor used to regularly mock me in class and he held me up as the “man of faith”. That’s nothing compared to what many Christians around the world experienced by simply choosing to be a Jesus follower.

Why do some people never give up? I want to talk about the human side of the equation today – why some people stick. The main reason that any of us stick, of course, is because God is faithful and God keeps holding on to us.

The Apostle Paul wrote this:

Slide Philippians 1:4-6

⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

And, we have in the well-known verses found in Romans 8:

Slide Romans 8:38-39

³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

But from the human side, what does the author of Hebrews tell us keeps us anchored to our faith? What enables any Christian to never give up despite extreme pressure to throw in the towel?

Let’s look at

Slide Hebrews 1:1-2

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.

I think the first thing that keeps people from quitting is:

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A conviction that God has spoken

Where has God spoken? The author of Hebrews tells us, first of all,

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In Scripture

Let's look at what the author writes – by the way, we don't know who the author of Hebrews is. It is an unsigned letter. Virtually all New Testament commentators reject the idea that the Apostle Paul wrote this letter. The grammar and style is unlike anything we have from the Apostle Paul. New Testament scholars tell us that the Greek is incredibly polished, as polished as anything we have in the New Testament. Hebrews is almost certainly written by an exceptionally well-trained Greek speaking Jewish Christian who was immersed in the Hebrew Scriptures.

But, what keeps people in the faith? The conviction that God has spoken. Let's read again:

Slide Hebrews 1:1

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways,

This is an amazing statement. God spoke. We have a totally different relationship with a being who speaks and one who doesn't. For those of you who are dog owners, imagine one night you came home and your dog greets you at the door and says, "How was your day? You look a little tired. Are you still having relational problems with your boss?" You'd have an entirely different relationship with your dog if your dog spoke!

Followers of Jesus who never give up are people who have a conviction that God has spoken through the scriptures. God did not leave us guessing how to have a relationship with himself or what he is like or the way to a good and satisfying life. It's not like, well, it's all so very confusing and so mysterious. No one can say anything meaningful or true about God. We're all just left guessing about the way to a good and satisfying life. God has spoken. And the people who stick in the Christian faith are people who have a deeply rooted conviction that God has spoken in the scriptures.

But why? Why should we Christians believe that God has spoken in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament? If you have ever taken an Old Testament class in a religion department at a university, you'll be taught that the Old Testament is really no different than many of the other religious books that were common in the ancient Near East. There's nothing particularly special or unique about the Old Testament. It's just like all the other books that archeologists have found.

John Oswalt, who is an Old Testament professor at Asbury Seminary in Kentucky and is the father of one of our campus pastors, Andrew Oswalt, wrote a wonderful book a few years ago titled *The Bible Among the Myths*. Oswalt lists a dozen major differences between the Old Testament and every other religious text that we know of from the ancient world. The most obvious difference between the Old Testament and that of

Israel's neighbors in the ancient is the monotheism found everywhere in the Old Testament. The Old Testament continuously insists that the Lord is One and there's no other being in the same category as him.

Thousands of years after the Old Testament was written, there are still only three monotheistic religions in the world – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All of them get their monotheism – their belief in one God – from one source, the Old Testament. The ancient world believed hundreds of gods and goddesses. Only Israel and the Old Testament insisted that there was one God and held onto that even to the point of death. How did they come up with such an idea of one God when everyone else said there were hundreds of gods? God spoke.

The ancient world was also filled with idols. People bowed down to images of men and women and birds and fish and bulls. Unique to the ancient world, only the Old Testament insisted that you couldn't depict God with any idol, with any image, or in any painting. In fact, when the Roman General, Titus, invaded Jerusalem in 70 A.D., he went into the Temple, into the Holy Place, into the Holy of Holies, because he wanted to see what the idol that the Jews worshipped in the Holy of Holies looked like. He broke into the Holy of Holies, and do you know what he discovered there? It was empty. There was no idol. There was no image. God's people didn't worship using an idol when everyone else did. Why not? Because of a conviction that God has spoken in the Scriptures.

Let me give you a simple illustration of what I'm driving at. Let's say you're here in Ohio and you come upon a 100 acre field. 95 acres are covered with various weeds that grow naturally here in Ohio – ragweed, crabgrass, chickweed, dandelions. 95 acres filled with different kinds of weeds. But in the middle of this 100 acre plot are five acres of the most beautiful, lush Kentucky bluegrass you've ever seen. Not a weed anywhere, just this lush, thick lawn. Would you say, "That lawn probably grew naturally in the middle of this field of weeds."? Or would you say, "That lawn would not exist apart from outside intervention. Someone planted that lawn. Someone is using lots of weed killer."

The Old Testament is like a field of Kentucky bluegrass in the midst of hundreds of acres of weeds. It could not have arisen naturally from the soil of the ancient Near East. And the New Testament is the same. It's just as unique in the Greco-Roman world of the first century as the Old Testament is in the ancient Near Eastern world. Why do we believe God has spoken in the Bible? Because there's no accounting for how different the message is, how radically unique the belief system is, how uncommon its ethics are, compared to the culture of the day. The Bible had to be an intervention from the outside. The Bible didn't come naturally from the cultural soil where we find it. There had to be an intervention, a revelation from outside the system.

But the Old Testament was just partial, it was preparatory, it was a signpost pointing to Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment.

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In his Son

Here's what we read:

Slide Hebrews 1:2

² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.

Jesus is God's perfect revelation.

Here's what we read:

Slide Hebrews 1:3

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.

Some translations say that the Son bears the stamp of God's nature. The word "stamp" is a little closer to what the author is getting at. It's the imprint that a signet ring leaves on a document that's being stamped with wax to seal it. It's the impression left on a coin that's being minted. It's the stamp of an image. So, what the writer of Hebrews is saying is that in Jesus Christ, we have this perfect, visible expression of God. It's not just that in Jesus we hear God speaking. It's also that in Jesus we see God's glory. Jesus said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."

The Apostle John says in

Slide John 1:14

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

What is it that keeps a follower of Jesus from throwing in the towel even when they are under pressure? A conviction that God has spoken in Scripture and in Jesus. A Christian is someone who says, "I've met God Almighty in Jesus Christ." In other words, because I've met God in Jesus, I'm not in the dark anymore. I can't claim ignorance. I can't fool myself into saying, "Well, I really don't know the meaning of life or the way to a fulfilling life. I really don't know who God is or what he's like. I don't know what God thinks about this or that behavior or whether it matters if I continue on in faith or if I quit." I've heard God's voice in the scripture and I've seen God's glory in Jesus Christ.

But there's one other reason why having found Jesus we can never give up. In verses two and three, the author gives seven specific descriptions telling us why Jesus is the most extraordinary person we can ever encounter. The author writes:

Slide Hebrews 1:2-3

² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. 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.

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- Jesus is God's Son
- Jesus is God's appointed heir
- Jesus is God's created agent
- Jesus is God's personified glory
- Jesus is God's revelation
- Jesus is God's cosmic sustainer
- Jesus is God's unique sacrifice

How do all of these things that Jesus is, keep us from giving up when we're under great pressure? A Christian is somebody who makes

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A commitment of love to an extraordinary person

Listen, the reason why people are able to resist temptation, to do things that are really hard to do, to not throw in the towel, to never quit, is because they've made a commitment to something higher, something greater, something bigger than themselves or than this moment.

An Orthodox Jewish person says, "It is unthinkable for me to eat a pork sandwich, even though it looks really tasty, because I'm an Orthodox Jew. I've made a commitment of love to something higher, something bigger. It keeps me from being tempted to eat a certain food."

Someone else says, "I'm an FBI agent. I've made a commitment of love and loyalty to the United States. It's unthinkable for me to commit treason against my country just for some money or fame."

Another man says, “I’m a married man. I’ve made a commitment of love to my wife. It’s unthinkable for me to have an affair. I’ve given myself to something higher, something better than what’s being offered in this moment.”

A missionary doctor says, “I’ve been called to meet the desperate medical needs of people living in the Congo. I know what I’m made for. It’s unthinkable for me to set up a practice in the United States and live a comfortable life because I’ve been gripped by something more compelling, something higher.”

Friends, this is what a Christian says. A Christian says, “It’s unthinkable for me to turn my back on Jesus in a moment of temptation, in a decision regarding romance or work or to walk away from Him when I’m being persecuted. I’ve fallen in love with Him. I’m gripped by something bigger than myself. Something greater than this moment. I have been mastered by someone better than this. I’ve made a commitment of love to Jesus Christ. And I can’t turn my back on this wonderful person who gave himself for me.”

Let’s pray.

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Hebrews 1

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- III. A commitment of love to an extraordinary person