Hebrews 10:23 *Force of Habit: The Hope We Profess*

***No Excuse Sunday***Hunting around on the internet I found a bulletin announcement for a church that was holding a special Sunday morning service to boost attendance. They called it “No Excuse Sunday” and it was mostly made up (at least I hope it was made up). Here’s what it said:

NO EXCUSE SUNDAY: DEDICATED TO MISSING CHURCH ATTENDEES!
To make it possible for everyone to attend church this Sunday, we are going to have a special "No Excuse Sunday":

* Cots will be placed in the foyer for those who say, "Sunday is my only day to sleep in."
* There will be a special section with lounge chairs for those who feel that our pews are too hard.
* Eye drops will be available for those with tired eyes from watching TV late Saturday night.
* We will have steel helmets for those who say, "The roof would cave in if I ever came to church."
* Blankets will be furnished for those who think the church is too cold, and fans for those who say it is too hot.
* Scorecards will be available for those who wish to list the hypocrites present.
* Relatives and friends will be in attendance for those who can't go to church and cook dinner, too.
* We will distribute "Stamp Out Stewardship" buttons for those that feel the church is always asking for money.
* One section will be devoted to trees and grass for those who like to seek God in nature.
* Doctors and nurses will be in attendance for those who plan to be sick on Sunday.
* The sanctuary will be decorated with both Christmas poinsettias and Easter lilies for those who never have seen the church without them.
* We will provide hearing aids for those who can't hear the preacher and cotton wool for those who think he's too loud!

Hope to see you there! (<http://madtbone.tripod.com/church-excuses.html>)

I don’t think a Sunday morning service like that would be a very good idea, but those excuses do sound familiar. When it comes to attending worship on Sunday morning, we are good at finding reasons not to go.

***Trends***A couple of weeks ago we started the New Year by talking about trends in church attendance. Over the last several years there have been frequent reports about the decline of religion in America. Part of this is attributed to the so-called “rise of the nones”—that is, more people than ever before are marking “none” when asked their religious affiliation--as well as an increase in the “dones”, people who used to attend church but no longer do. <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/267920/millennials-religiosity-amidst-rise-nones.aspx>

<https://churchleaders.com/outreach-missions/outreach-missions-articles/177144-thom-schultz-rise-of-the-done-with-church-population.html>

But probably the biggest reason for the decline in church attendance is that people who attend church are attending less frequently. Church trend observer Thom S. Rainer explains with some simple math:

If the frequency of attendance changes, then attendance will respond accordingly. For example, if 200 members attend every week the average attendance is, obviously, 200. But if one-half of those members miss only one out of four weeks, the attendance drops to 175. <https://factsandtrends.net/2018/12/17/the-number-1-reason-for-the-decline-in-church-attendance/>

Just a slight change in attendance patterns can considerably change the average number of people who are here. The trend is that plenty of people still affiliate with the church—they still consider themselves members and are relatively active—but the frequency with which they attend the primary meeting of the church on Sunday mornings is going down.

And that appears to be the trend here at Hope Church. As we showed at our annual meeting last December, our total membership is slightly higher than it was four years ago. And yet, over the same four-year period our Sunday attendance has declined by about 100 people per week. In other words, we have as many people connected to Hope as we ever have, but those same people are not attending as consistently as they used to.

***In the Habit***
The series of sermons we are in, then, is called “Force of Habit.” And we’re talking about making a habit out of Sunday Morning church attendance. Not just because we want to see more people here on Sunday Mornings, but because we believe church attendance is a keystone habit that helps us grow in our relationship with God. As I said in that first week: being here on Sunday mornings does not make you a Christian; but if you are a Christian, then regularly attending church is a great way to have God’s ear, to hear God’s voice, and to be part of God’s body.

And the passage that we are using for the series—the passage that gives us that word “habit”—is **Hebrews 10:19-25:**

**19**Therefore, brothers and sisters, 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**let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. **23**Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. **24**And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, **25**not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Verse 25 says that meeting together is a habit. For the original recipients of this letter, it was a habit some of them were getting out of. They had all kinds of excuses for not meeting together—and for them, their excuses carried a lot more weight than a desire to sleep in or out-of-town activities; their excuses had to do with persecution and other pressures—but the author is urging then not to give up the habit. There are too many benefits to getting together with other Christians. And those benefits are highlighted in the exhortations of this passage—the “let us” phrases in verses 22, 23, and 24.

***The Hope***Today, then, we are focusing on verse 23 and we are talking about how meeting together helps us to reinforce and strengthen our faith. We’re going to look at why what we are doing right now—the sermon—as well as other aspects of Sunday morning that teach us and engage us in God’s Word are such a vital part of our Christian walk.

So let’s **look at verse 23**:

**23**Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

We’re going to look at several key words in this verse, but let’s start **with the word “hope.”**

That’s the name of our church, so it is clearly an important word to us. And the way the word is being used here is as a sort of summary of what we believe as Christians. Specifically, “the hope we profess” is a way of capturing all the great things that we believe about Jesus.

“Hope” can be a slippery word. The way we use the word hope in our everyday language is to imply a certain amount of uncertainty. It can be almost wishy-washy. You might say: “I hope it doesn’t rain on the day of the picnic.” That can mean a couple of things, either the forecast is calling for a 90% chance of rain and you are holding out hope against all reasonable science that the forecast is wrong. Or, maybe the forecast is for a sunny day, but you know there is always the slightest chance that rain could appear and you are thus hoping for the best. Either way, the word “hope” the way we usually use it has an element of wishful thinking.

But “hope” in the Bible is a much more confident thing. Our hope in Jesus is not wishful thinking, but rather it is a rock-solid assurance that Jesus has opened for us a new and living way to God. As the lyrics to the song we sang earlier say:

My hope is built on nothing less,
than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.

And one of the purposes of our gathering week after week is to go over and repeat the things that we believe about Jesus. It is to remember and proclaim the great truths of the Bible that make up the cornerstone of our faith. That’s what this verse means by the word “hope.” It’s not wishful thinking, it’s a rock-solid guarantee.

At its heart, **Christianity is not a religion of behavior, it is a religion of belief.** Christianity is not about a code of conduct or following a certain lifestyle pattern. It’s not about praying five times a day or lighting incense candles or giving up your spot in line at the grocery store or even about coming to church every Sunday morning. Christianity is not a religion of behavior.

Instead, at its heart, Christianity is a religion of belief. We believe that there is an Almighty God who created the heavens and the earth and everything that can be seen. We believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God—the second member of the Trinity—who was sent to earth as a great high priest who would offer Himself as the sacrifice to pay the penalty of our sins. We believe that we have access to God only through the death and resurrection of Jesus. And we believe there is a Holy Spirit—the third member of the Trinity—who connects us to Jesus and to one another in the church. Those beliefs affect our behavior, but our religion starts with our beliefs.

And coming to church on Sunday mornings is our opportunity to reinforce those beliefs together. **Making a habit of being in church is how we deepen and strengthen the beliefs that are the heart of our hope.** That’s the Big Idea this morning. If Christianity is first and foremost a religion of belief, then we need regular opportunities to deepen and strengthen our beliefs. We need to reinforce our hope.

Let’s put **verse 23** back up:

**23**Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

I’ve got three reasons it is important to gather and reinforce what we believe. I’m going to say that we need to remind, restrict, and rehearse our hope. And I’ll connect each to a key word in the verse.

***Community Creates Belief***First, when we gather together **we are reminded of our hope**. Here I want to pay attention to the word “hold.”

The author of Hebrews is urging his audience to hold on to hope. Because, again, the risk is that they are about to let their hope go. They are at risk of giving up on Jesus.

This is actually the main theme of the entire book of Hebrews. You could say that Hebrews is all about holding onto faith when there are all kinds of pressures to walk away. Just a few verses later in chapter 10 we get a **picture of what was going on:**

**32**Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. **33**Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. **34**You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.

This is not a great advertisement for following Jesus. They “endured in a great conflict full of suffering.” Sometimes they were publicly exposed to insult and persecution. Sometimes it was their friends who were so treated, and they had to stand side by side. At one point, they even experienced the risk of imprisonment and the confiscation of their property.

This is quite a bit different then the thin list of excuses we had at the beginning of the message. If you want to talk about why you might not want to be seen walking into a Christian meeting on Sunday morning—this is a pretty good list.

And yet, it would appear that they endured these things gladly. It says they “joyfully accepted the confiscation” of their property. The author is actually reminding them that they’ve been through all this stuff before, because they knew they had a better and lasting possession in their hope in Jesus.

So now, he’s urging them to hold on. **The next verses:**

**35**So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.

**36**You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.

And then, **verse 39:**

**39**But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.

That’s a great line. That’s a rallying cry. “We do not belong to those who shrink back.” That’s what it means to hold on to hope.

And one of the ways we do that is by gathering to remind one another that we do not belong to those who shrink back. Sometimes, in order to hold on, we need to be able to look into the eyes of others who believe the same things we do.

I mentioned the first week that in preparation for this sermon I read a book called *The Power of Habit.* It’s not a Christian book, but it looks at scientific research into how habits are formed and changed. And one of the things it talks about is how important communities are for developing and reinforcing good habits. It says it like this: “A community creates belief.” (p. 85)

You can see this in a lot of different parts of life. They’ve done studies where they’ve asked people to run as far as they can by themselves, and then they’ve asked the same person to run with a group. Invariably, people can run farther when they run together. So groups like Weight Watchers, Peloton, recovery groups like AA, and more are built on the idea that good habits are developed when they are built in groups.

The book mentions a 1994 Harvard study of people who had radically changed their lives. They found that people “changed because they were embedded in social groups that made change easier.” The book goes on to say:

When people join groups where change seems possible, the potential for that change to occur becomes more real. For most people who overhaul their lives, there are no seminal moments or life-altering disasters. There are simply communities…who make change believable.

The author quotes one of the Harvard researchers:

Change occurs among other people. It seems real when we can see it in other people’s eyes.

The book is about changing habits, but I think it also says a lot about how we deepen and strengthen our faith. When you are looking to be reminded that God is good and that He is still in control; when you need to remember that forgiveness is possible and that heaven is available for those who trust in Jesus; when you need a little encouragement that trusting in Jesus is not going to be in vain; it is really good to come to church and look in the eyes of others who believe those things and be reminded that they are true. That’s how we hold on to faith. Or, as it says in the *Power of Habit*:

Belief is easier when it occurs within a community. (p. 88-89)

***The Guardrails***Second, when we gather together **we restrict our hope**. Now, that sounds a little weird, so I need to explain. When I say that we “restrict” our hope I don’t mean to say that we put limits on it, or that we are trying to make Jesus into less than He is. Rather, I’m trying to say that one of the purposes of our gathering together is to clarify what is true and what is not. What I’m trying to say is that not all beliefs are equally valid.

“Restrict” is a sort of negative word, but I’m trying to capture the meaning of the word “unswervingly” in the verse.

Unswervingly. That’s actually a great word. It’s fun to say. But it’s not a word that we get to use in everyday conversation all that often.

So here’s what I thought of to illustrate “unswervingly”: I have this friend who I ride in the car with quite often. I’m not going to say who it is, but it might be somebody I go to a lot of basketball games with. And my friend—especially before it became against the law—liked to check his text messages while he was driving. Again, I’m not saying who this is (he might have been up here singing earlier), but when he would check his phone while driving you might say that he drove “swervingly.” Right? That’s why they’ve made it illegal to check your phone while driving, because it is distracting. And you have a tendency to swerve.

But my friend has one of those cars that beeps at you whenever you start to cross the lines on the road. And so, often, when I would ride with him, that beeping sound became kind of the soundtrack to our trips. He’d be checking his phone, we’d start to swerve, the car would beep, he’d straighten it out, repeat the process again and again.

And so, that’s kind of how I think of what we do here on Sunday mornings. One of the purposes of the weekly sermon—and the Sunday School lesson for our kids—is to function sort of like that beeper in the car. It’s to make sure that we are not swerving away from the hope that we profess. It’s to make sure that we’re keeping it in between the lines.

This is what I mean when I say that we need to restrict our hope. We need to be clear about what we believe, and what we don’t.

One of the great challenges of our time is the notion that one person’s views are just as true as another’s, no matter how ill-conceived they may be. We hear things like “you need to live your truth” and “the God I believe in wouldn’t do this or that…” There’s this conventional wisdom that since God can’t be seen, then everybody’s ideas about Him are equally valid.

But a core tenet of our faith is that God has revealed Himself in the Bible. We believe that there are true and knowable things about God—He’s not whatever we imagine Him to be, He is what He has revealed Himself to be in His Word.

And so, when we gather on Sunday mornings one of our purposes is to dig into this book and see the things that God has revealed about Himself. It’s how we hold unswervingly to the hope we profess.

The great privilege of my life is that I’ve had the opportunity to go to school to learn how to study and teach from this book. And you afford me the time, week after week, to study and read and think about this book so that I can stand up here on Sunday mornings and say true things about God. And we believe, in a very real way, that when we gather to hear the sermon on Sunday morning, that is a way that God is speaking to us.

But, at the same time, I don’t expect you to just take my word for it. Just because I’m the pastor that doesn’t mean that you are supposed to just blindly accept everything I say. Rather, like the Bereans who listened to Paul in Acts 17, you are expected to “examine the Scriptures” to see if what I say is true.

Our weekly gatherings are how we keep it between the lines. Studying God’s word together provides the guardrails—the beep, beep, beep—that keeps our faith from swerving all over the road.

***Visible Words***So, when we gather we remind one another of our hope and we restrict our hope to the truth that’s in God’s Word. Now, third, when we gather together **we rehearse our hope**. Gathering together is an opportunity to repeat and remember what we believe.

The word in the verse that has my attention here is the word “profess.”

“Profess” is kind of an old-fashioned word. It’s really a word that you only ever hear in church. I looked it up in an online dictionary and the main sense is to affirm one’s faith or allegiance to something, especially in a religious setting.

We have a phrase that we use in the church—Gary talked about it in the video—where we talk about making “profession of faith.” Basically, that’s when somebody comes before the church—specifically the elders—to declare their faith in Jesus. You could really say that’s what we are about as a church: helping people get to the place where they can confidently and boldly stand up and say that they believe in Jesus. And, of course, when people make “profession of faith” before the elders, we celebrate that during the worship service on Sunday mornings as well.

But we try to profess our hope every Sunday morning, not just on the mornings where we have new professions of faith. It’s not just a one-time thing, but something we need to repeat again and again.

Really, one of our goals every Sunday morning is to make sure we are rehearsing the content of our faith several times. That might be by reciting the Apostle’s Creed, or it might be in the songs that we sing, and hopefully we are hearing it in every sermon. We need to rehearse the good news of Jesus again and again, so that we can profess our faith in Him and be reminded of the hope that we have.

One of the ways we do that—though we don’t do it every week—is in the sacraments. Whenever we celebrate baptism or the Lord’s Supper we have the opportunity to rehearse our faith and be reminded of what Jesus has done for us. David Mathis, in the book *Habits of Grace,* writes:

These “visible words” rehearse for us the center of our faith through the God-given images and actions of washing, eating, and drinking. They engage not only our ears, but all five senses—sound, sight, touch, smell, and taste. Alongside preaching, they reveal to us again and again the heart of the gospel we profess and aim to echo in our lives. They are enacted “signs,” pointing to realities beyond themselves. (p. 173)

It’s worth remembering that for much of the church’s history most Christians were not literate. Few could read or even afford to have a copy of the Bible for themselves, but God gave us the symbols of water and bread and wine as simple ways to rehearse the gospel and be reminded of our hope. Holding unswervingly to the hope we profess doesn’t always need to involve a 3 point sermon or an in-depth Bible study, sometimes it can come from the simple reminder that his body was broken and his blood spilled to wash us clean of our sins.

***He Who Promised***So: making a habit of being in church is how we reinforce the beliefs that are the heart of our hope. We meet together to remind ourselves of what we believe, to restrict our beliefs to what is true, and to rehearse the good news of the gospel week after week.

One more thing as I close, the **end of the verse**:

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

Here’s why this matters, here’s why this is not a grand waste of time: Because God is faithful. Because what we proclaim and practice is true.

This isn’t just a case of us getting together and trying to talk ourselves into believing something that’s unbelievable. It’s not just a case of us rallying around some grand delusion. The hope that we have is not empty or in vain. It’s based on the character and track-record of God. It’s grounded in the history of the crucifixion and the resurrection. Jesus is faithful. Jesus is reliable.

And our hope is found in Him.