

Week 3 Devotional™ Reading

A Daily Devotional on the Book of Hebrews

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The Danger of Disbelief

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’ As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’”

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief. – Hebrews 3:7-19 ESV

Reaching back into the pages of the Old Testament narrative, the author quotes from Psalm 95, using the history of people of Israel as a life lesson for his Hebrew audience. The psalmist recounts the story of Israel’s rebellion against God during their journey from Egypt to the promised land. Under the direction of God, they had reached a place called Rephidim, and after setting up camp the discovered, “there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, ‘Give us water to drink’” (Exodus 17:1-2 ESV). Moses’ response was to ask them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” (Exodus 17:2 ESV). But driven by their physical thirst, they demanded, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” (Exodus 17:3 ESV).

The people were so angry with Moses that he feared for his life, suspecting that they would stone him. But God told Moses, “‘Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.’ And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the Lord by saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’” (Exodus 17:5-7 ESV).

That last line is key to understanding the story and to grasping the point that the author of Hebrews is trying to make. Influenced by the negative nature of their circumstances and their own physical desires, they doubted the presence, power and provision of God. This was in spite of all He had done to deliver them from Egypt and secure their freedom from slavery. The miracles of the ten plagues and the wonder of the Red Sea crossing faded into oblivion at the

first sign of trouble. Suddenly, their God was no match for their personal problems. And they grumbled. They complained. They revealed their ingratitude for all that God had done. And yet, in the face of their rebellion, God graciously provided them with water – from a rock. The apostle Paul provides with insight into what was going on behind the scenes.

I don't want you to forget, dear brothers and sisters, about our ancestors in the wilderness long ago. All of them were guided by a cloud that moved ahead of them, and all of them walked through the sea on dry ground. In the cloud and in the sea, all of them were baptized as followers of Moses. All of them ate the same spiritual food, and all of them drank the same spiritual water. For they drank from the spiritual rock that traveled with them, and that rock was Christ. Yet God was not pleased with most of them, and their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. – 1 Corinthians 10:1-5 NLT

The rock was Christ. It was a representation of the mercy and grace of God that would one day be expressed through the gift of His Son. Moses was instructed to strike the rock. The rock was beaten and from it came living water. God provided for them the very thing for which they had grumbled and complained. But while they “drank the same spiritual water,” God was not pleased with most of them, and their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. They never made it to the land of promise, the place of rest. The psalmist clearly portrays the anger of God with those who had doubted His saving power. “For forty years I loathed that generation and said, ‘They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known “my ways.” Therefore, I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest’” (Psalm 95:10-11 ESV).

The letter to the Hebrews provides us with the application. “Be careful then, dear brothers and sisters. Make sure that your own hearts are not evil and unbelieving, turning you away from the living God. You must warn each other every day, while it is still ‘today,’ so that none of you will be deceived by sin and hardened against God. For if we are faithful to the end, trusting God just as firmly as when we first believed, we will share in all that belongs to Christ” (Hebrews 3:12-14 NLT). The author is not suggesting that we can lose our salvation. But he warns against having “evil and unbelieving” hearts. The danger the Jewish believers in his audience face is turning away from the saving grace provided by God through Jesus Christ and returning to their old, familiar faith in Judaism. Warren Wiersbe writes, “every believer is tempted to give up his confession of Christ and go back into the world system’s life of compromise and bondage.” Again, this is not about losing our salvation, but missing out on all that God has promised us as believers in this life. By turning away from God and doubting the sufficiency of His Son’s saving work, F. F. Bruce provides with the context: “a relapse from Christianity into Judaism would be comparable to the action of the Israelites when they ‘turned back in their hearts unto Egypt’ (Acts 7:30); it would not be a mere return to a position previously occupied, but a gesture of outright apostasy, a complete break with God’ (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*).

There will always be the temptation to doubt God and return to whatever way of life we lived before. We may even be tempted to try something completely new and different, other than the walk of faith. That is why the writer of Hebrews warns us, “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God”

(Hebrews 3:12 ESV). The issue is one of unbelief. That is why we are to “exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’” (Hebrews 3:13 ESV). We need to encourage one another to keep the faith, to remain committed to the cause of Christ. We must not allow circumstances or our own personal passions to drive us away from God and back to the false promises of this world. We must continue to believe in and rest on the promises of God, in spite of all we see happening around us. As the writer of Hebrews puts it a little later on in this letter, “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Hebrews 11:6 ESV).

No Rest for the Weary

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, “As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest,’” although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.”⁵ And again in this passage he said, “They shall not enter my rest.”

Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. – Hebrews 4:1-13 ESV

There is an ominous-sounding warning in these verses. When the author speaks of the people of God not entering the rest provided for them by God, it can't help but get our attention. But what does he mean when he writes, “those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of unbelief” (Hebrews 4:6 ESV)? There have been many over the centuries who have tried to equate the crossing over of the Israelites into the land of Canaan with the death of the believer and their entrance into heaven. But if we apply this analogy to the author's meaning of “rest” we will find ourselves wrestling with the possibility of one losing their salvation. Because he is writing to believers and he is warning them not to make the same mistake as their ancestors in the wilderness. They “heard and yet rebelled” (Hebrews 3:16 ESV). They sinned and their “bodies fell in the wilderness” (Hebrews 3:17 ESV). “They were unable to enter because of unbelief” (Hebrews 3:19 ESV).

That last line is key to understanding what is going on in these verses. The issue is that of unbelief. He warned his readers, “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God” (Hebrews 3:12 ESV). He encouraged them to exhort one another, “that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:13 ESV). The problem with equating the promised land with heaven is that the people of Israel had to immediately to battle once they entered the land. They had to strive to possess the land and dispossess the people that lived there. Their time in the land of promise was one of testing, conflict, and a constant struggle to trust God rather

than their own resourcefulness. Yes, God blessed them. He gave them victories over their enemies. But because of unfaithfulness, they were eventually evicted by God from the promised land and sent into captivity for their rebellion against Him. That is why making the promised land analogous to heaven makes no sense and eventually breaks down. No one will be evicted from heaven because of unbelief.

So what is the author talking about? What is this rest he warns against not entering? Several times in these verses he refers to the “good news” they had received. “For the good news came to us just as to them” (Hebrews 4:2 ESV). He uses the Greek word, *euaggelizō* which is the same word used by Jesus when referring to the gospel message He preached. It is the same word used by the angels when they told the shepherds in the field of the good news regarding the birth of Jesus. The author of Hebrews says that the people of Israel had heard the good news, “but the message **they heard** did not benefit them, because they were not **united by faith with those who listened**” (Hebrews 4:2 ESV). They heard, but they did not listen. They heard but failed to believe the good news given. They had evil, unbelieving hearts.

Several times in this passage the author refers to the sabbath rest of God. He talks about the fact that God, after having created the universe, rested on the seventh day. The Hebrews word *shabbath* means “rest.” God was not tired, but he ceased from His labors because His work had been completed. All that He had intended to do had been done. His will had been accomplished. The writer makes it clear that the entering into the land was not the rest that God intended.

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later one.
– Hebrews 4:8 ESV

In fact, he writes, “there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his” (Hebrews 4:9 ESV). The issue seems to be that of works verses faith. The rest the author is speaking of is the belief we are to have in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross and our complete and total dependence on what He has done for us. We can rest in the sufficiency of His sacrifice. There is nothing more that we need to do. The Jewish audience to whom this letter was addressed had heard the good news regarding Jesus and His sacrificial death on the cross, but they ran the risk of hearing, but not listening. They, like their ancestors, were prone to go back to their own methods of attempting to achieve a right standing with God. Rather than resting in the finished work of Christ, they were being tempted to go back to Judaism with all of its ritual and rights. So, the author warns them to “strive to enter that rest so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience” (Hebrews 4:11 ESV).

He is not suggesting that they can lose their salvation, but that their initial “belief” may not have been belief at all. They had not been fully convinced that God’s redemptive work on their behalf was complete. They were not resting in the promise of eternal salvation. They were not trusting in the sufficiency of Christ and the hope of their future redemption.

Jesus did not promise us a trouble-free, peaceful life on this earth. He did say, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30 ESV).

And yet, He had this to say to His disciples right before His death:

“Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” – John 16:32-33 ESV

Our time on this earth is anything but easy. But we can have peace in the midst of the struggles because we know that He has overcome the world. Our rest is found in the promise of His finished work. He is going to someday return and wrap up what He started and complete what God has given Him to do. It is in that fact that we are to find our rest. The temptation for all of us is to doubt God, to fail to take Him at His word. We can look at the circumstances surrounding us and begin to disbelieve His promises and question the reliability of all that Christ has done. So, the author invites us to allow the Word of God as a divine scalpel to penetrate our hearts and expose and remove those thoughts and intentions of the heart that would cause us to doubt and disbelieve God. He wants us to rest in the reality of our future rest. He wants us to trust in His promise of not only our future redemption, but the final restoration of the world. God’s will WILL be done. And we can rest in that fact.

Help in Time of Need

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. – Hebrews 4:14-16 ESV

The life of faith is not an easy one. Following Christ requires commitment and a determination to keep on believing and trusting even in the midst of the constant and deadly barrage of the enemy. Paul encourages us, “In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one” (Ephesians 6:16 ESV). Peter warns us, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8 ESV). Later on, in this letter, the author will tell us,

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God’s throne. Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won’t become weary and give up. – Hebrews 12:1-3 NLT

The Christian life requires endurance and perseverance. It demands that we keep our eyes focused on Jesus, not just for our salvation, but for our ongoing sanctification. He is the “champion who initiates and perfects our faith.” We are to look at His example, how He endured the cross and how He was “tempted in every way, just as we are” (Hebrews 4:15 NLT). Jesus suffered and died because of sin; not His, but ours. He sacrificed His life so we wouldn’t have to give up ours. Which is the author of Hebrews goes on to say, “After all, you have not yet given your lives in your struggle against sin” (Hebrews 4:4 NLT). We will never have to die for our sins, because Jesus took our place. But we will have to struggle with the presence and reality of indwelling sin. While we live on this earth we will have to “strive to enter that rest” (Hebrews 4:11 ESV) – the rest that comes with trusting in the finished work of Christ, that includes not only our salvation, but our sanctification and ultimate glorification. We will have to constantly “hold firmly to the faith we profess” (Hebrews 4:14 NLT). Our hope is in Christ, or as Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans, “from faith for faith” (Romans 1:17 ESV). Literally, our faith must remain in Christ, from the beginning to the end. Paul told the Philippian Christians, “I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns” (Philippians 1:6 NLT). We have to hold firmly to that fact, even in the face of difficulty and disappointments.

And when we find ourselves in need, we are to turn to Jesus, our great high priest. He represents us before God and He fully understands what we are going through because He has

been in our shoes. He is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. He was tempted just as we are. He knows what it is like to be under attack and to feel overwhelmed. And He also knows what it is like to not sin, to not give in to feelings of doubt and despair. He never failed to trust God. He never once failed to obey God. Paul tells us that “being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8 ESV). So, when we find ourselves in a difficult spot, we can confidently turn to Him as our divine high priest. And we can find the grace and mercy we need to help us in our time of need. When we are struggling, we don’t find a high priest who shakes His finger in our face and condemns our weakness. No, we find a sympathetic and empathetic high priest who reminds us that our sins have been paid for and any need for us to try to atone for our own sins has been done away with. The author will expand on this them in chapter nine.

But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! – Hebrews 9:11-14 NLT

Jesus played a dual role. He acted as the high priest, bringing the atoning sacrifice for man’s sins before God the Father. But He also played the part of the sacrificial lamb. He gave His life because it was the only sacrifice that would be acceptable to the Father. He was the unblemished, sinless Son of God, offering His own life as a substitute or stand-in for sinful humanity. And as those who have trusted in His substitutionary death on the cross, we can still come before the throne of grace and find mercy, hope, strength, comfort, assurance, and a constant reminder of God’s everlasting, never failing love for us. We will face trials and tribulations in this life. We will encounter difficulties and experience times of doubt and despair. But we have an understanding high priest who knows our weaknesses and has provided the cure for what ails us. As the author put it earlier in his letter:

Therefore, it was necessary for him to be made in every respect like us, his brothers and sisters, so that he could be our merciful and faithful High Priest before God. Then he could offer a sacrifice that would take away the sins of the people. Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested. – Hebrews 2:17-18 NLT

We have help in time of need. We have a God who understands our weakness and has made compensation for it. We have not been left on our own. We don’t have to face the trials of this earth in our own human effort. We can stand firm and hold on to our original confession because our high priest is there to help us.