

A Study in Hebrews

Study Two

Hebrews 3:1-4:11

Day One

3:1 Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.

2 He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house.

3 Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself.

4 For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything.

v. 1 – How simple yet profound that command is: fix your thoughts on Jesus. Jesus is to be the focus of my life, service and devotion and the love of the Church. But how many things—doctrines, leaders, disputes, and traditions—occupy the thoughts of the Church and its members. When I was writing the study for Philipians, I saw that Paul mentioned Jesus' name 10 times in the first 18 verses. It really is all about Jesus, but I have managed to make it about so many other things on so many occasions.

Jesus is both an apostle and high priest. I have commented in other studies about the current apostolic movement, where it is recognized that apostles, literally those who are “sent forth,” are still part of the Church today. But many have used this to position themselves for unusual honor, blessings and financial gain. This should not be.

If anyone is an apostle, they should remember that Jesus is one Himself and model their apostolic ministry after Jesus. Jesus wore no robes, took no title, had no reserved parking space, did not hire his family and did not earn a large salary. The Church would be stronger if we fixed our thoughts on Jesus and not on other men.

vs. 2&3 – Jesus was appointed a high priest and He was faithful to His appointment. The Jewish writer, writing to Jewish believers, now compared Jesus to the preeminent Jewish leader—Moses. He started out mentioning that both were faithful to God's plan for their lives. But that is where the comparison ended, for Jesus was superior to Moses.

John wrote:

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17-18).

The Jews clung to Moses and refused to follow Jesus. Now these Hebrews, to whom this letter was written, were tragically considering allegiance once again to Moses, an inferior apostle to Jesus:

Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from." (John 9:28-29).

Peter had been tempted to make Jesus an equal with Moses, for when he was on the mountain with Jesus, Moses and Elijah appeared to Jesus and talked with Him. Peter wanted to build a monument to all three men, but God intervened:

Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (Matthew 17:4-5).

God's message is the same today as then: don't make anyone an equal with my Son. He is supreme and preeminent, and I command that you listen to Him and Him alone! Whose voice are you listening to?

v. 4 – Jesus is worthy of greater honor than Moses, Elijah, Peter, Paul, Martin Luther, any Pope, any modern-day apostle, Buddha, Mohammed, or the Dalai Lama. Jesus is Lord of all and anyone who shares Jesus' glory with another is a fool, guilty of idolatry. Jesus is on a par with no one.

Day Two

5 Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, testifying to what would be said in the future.

6 But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.

vs. 5&6 – Moses was a servant in God's house but Jesus was a son. And the house of which the writer spoke was the Church, made up of people like you and me. Moses was a servant that helped build the house, but Jesus was the heir of the house. Moses can teach me, but my allegiance belongs to Jesus and not my particular church, church leader, church doctrine, church tradition or church history.

I can't say this enough and you may read it and shake you head, saying, "That's right. Amen, brother." But are you then guilty of saying, "Well, that's the way we've always done things in this church" or "We can't say or do things like that around here because the bishop, pastor, elder or deacons will get angry." It's easy to say "Amen" to a word; it's a whole other thing to walk it out.

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?" (Matthew 15:1-3).

So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?"

He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men" (Mark 7:5-8).

"Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that" (Mark 7:13).

Have you nullified the word of God in order to follow the traditions of men? Have you looked the other way when others have? If you answer "yes" to either of those two questions, what are you going to do about it? Jesus said:

"I do not accept praise from men, but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God? "But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?" (John 5:41-47).

Have you worked for the praise of men at the expense of God's praise? I know that there are times when I have, and I have repented and still trying to walk out my faithfulness and loyalty to God and God alone.

Day Three

7 So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice,
8 do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert,
9 where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did.
10 That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.'
11 So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'"

vs. 7-9 – The writer of Hebrews obviously believed that the Holy Spirit wrote the Scriptures—here from Psalm 85:7—and that the content of the Bible is God's Word. Notice that the writer did not say, "The Holy Spirit said" but rather "The Holy Spirit says." The Word is still speaking and the key word after that is "today." When I was a

pastor, I would meet with some of the people with whom I worked and would usually ask, “What is the Lord saying?” I have found that God is always speaking, addressing something in our lives that He is changing.

The issue is not whether God will speak, but whether I will listen. The writer urged them not to “harden their hearts.” There are many things that can harden a heart, but I think that fear and rebellion are the two leading causes. What do you think?

The Lord tested His people in the wilderness and taught them to listen to His voice. God will test you the same way to accomplish the same end.

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you (Deuteronomy 8:2-5).

Has this been your experience? Are you experiencing a time of testing now? How are you reacting to it?

v. 10 – It is important to worship God as He is and not as we want Him to be. We can actually worship a false image of God in our minds. It is important, therefore, to know God’s ways and be familiar with how He will act and what He will do. We are told that Moses knew God’s ways, but Israel was only familiar with God’s deeds or actions.

He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel (Psalm 103:7).

I want to know God and be acquainted with His heart. I am not saying I can know everything about God, but I want to recognize His works and respond to His voice. “Lord, don’t let me harden my heart. Don’t permit me to keep testing you, demanding that You prove Yourself to me according to my will. You have nothing to prove to me, Lord. You have been faithful. I don’t want you to be angry with me, Lord, so I ask that You continue to speak and help me to obey.”

v. 11 – God made a vow when He was angry at Israel that they would not enter His rest. I want and need God’s rest. To obtain it, I must do things God’s ways and trust in Him and His ways. Like God put an angel to guard the entrance to the Garden of Eden so no man could enter again, so He put a guard over the doorway to His rest, forbidding those who had hardened their hearts from ever finding that rest.

Let’s move on and see precisely what it is that prevents us from entering the rest that God intends for us to enjoy.

Day Four

12 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

14 We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.

15 As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion."

v. 12 – Faith is not a feeling. Here the writer commanded that no one have a “sinful, unbelieving heart.” That means that everyone can make the decision to have a holy, believing heart. What is the condition of your heart? When did your last faith testimony occur? If it occurred more than 12 months ago, why has it been so long? What are you believing the Lord for right now?

It would seem that rest and faith, no rest and unbelief are connected in some way. Let's read on.

v. 13 – We need the encouragement of other believers on a daily basis or at least during the “today” on which the Holy Spirit is speaking to us. A life of faith taxes your natural inclinations because things don't happen according to your timetable or in a way that you can understand. A life of faith operates according to God's plan and timing. I have known some people who have “gotten off the faith bus” because the journey was too long or bumpy. While good and holy people, they have decided the faith life involved too much pressure and they have subtly hardened their heart to any faith project.

v. 14 – Someone once said that a walk with God is not a sprint but a marathon. There are those who start fast but fade. There is much talk about “finishing well” and that should be our goals. We must firmly hold our faith confidence from first to last. If we don't, we are in danger of not entering the rest that God has for us.

I have often told people that it never takes less faith, but rather more faith to progress in the things of God. I liken it to raising a child. When they are babies, we need diaper faith. When they are older, we need faith for university tuition. The needs are greater, and so the faith to obtain them must be greater as well. You cannot have diaper faith and receive tuition returns.

v. 15 – This rebellion mentioned from Psalm 95, quoted for the second time in this chapter, is a description of the events that occurred in Exodus 16 and 17. It was there that the people murmured greatly against the Lord for what they perceived to be His lack of provision. They considered going back to Egypt because they did not like their living conditions and they did not trust the Lord for anything better. The people provoked the Lord and He threatened to let them die there had it not been for Moses' intervention.

Day Five

16 Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt?

17 And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert?

18 And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed?

19 So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.

vs. 16&17 – Only Joshua and Caleb made it to the Promised Land. A lot of people died because of their disobedience. I think of what Jesus said:

Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" He said to them, "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to" (Luke 13:23-24).

Just because someone talks about the Lord or attends church doesn't mean that they will enter all that God has for them.

vs. 18&19 – They did not enter rest because they disobeyed, because of unbelief. So disobedience and unbelief are the same. If you hear and don't act on what you hear, then you are exercising disobedience, which is a manifestation of unbelief. We can then conclude that faith and obedience lead to rest, even though they may cause you to be more active than disobedience. We can also conclude that rest isn't cessation of activities, but rather a proper attitude and perspective in the midst of activities. That attitude is one of quiet confidence in the God who is leading you.

So, do you have rest now? I am usually very busy but I have learned to rest in Him while I am on the go. That enables me to enjoy His rest even while very active. I don't think that this is referring to a literal Sabbath day, although I do think we all need to plan in a day off and do things that give us refreshment (even God took a day off after six days of creation). But the rest the writer was talking about here was not a literal day, but rather an attitude.

Day Six

4:1 Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.

2 For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.

3 Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, "So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world.

4 For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "And on the seventh day God rested from all his work."

5 And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest."

vs. 1-3 – Faith is our means to spiritual rest. I trust God for my salvation, provision and protection and I can rest in the fact that He never slumbers nor sleeps. He is able to do what He said He would do. How did Israel come short of entering the rest that God had for them?

That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt."

Then Moses and Aaron fell facedown in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there. Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes and said to the entire Israelite assembly, "The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them" (Numbers 14:1-9).

The writer was exhorting the Hebrews who were reading not to imitate their ancestors and not enter the Promised Land. The same exhortation goes out to you and me. Are you disillusioned with your walk with the Lord? Has it been harder than you thought? Have you stopped your faith journey, content to talk about God intellectually but not experientially? Press on! Don't give up! Have faith!

v. 4&5 – God entered rest from His own works, but vowed that Israel would not rest from their works. In Jesus' day, the Jews had perfected a system of works that would have made many tired. But they were actually exhilarated by their religious system and defended it against any who opposed it, even God! Can you imagine that the Jews had to kill God to preserve their system of worship to God? How ironic!

Do you have a system that is so religious that even God cannot penetrate it? If so, you haven't entered the rest that God has for you. If you persist, God will declare that you never will enter it.

Day Seven

6 It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience.

7 Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

8 For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. 9 There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; 10 for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.

11 Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.

v. 6 – The writer stated that those in the Old Testament had “the gospel” preached to them. Remember that gospel simply means “good news.” And remember that the writer equated disobedience to unbelief. It is disobedient not to believe God can do what He promised.

v. 7 – This is the third time this verse starting with “Today” was referenced in this letter. God is a “Today God.” God sets certain days to do certain things in certain lives. What is your “Today” at this time? What is the season that you are in? Do you know? Are you being obedient and full of faith?

v. 8-11 – I think this is a “funny” statement: let us make every “effort” to enter that rest. We must work to rest! Spiritual rest—resting in God—just doesn’t happen. We must obey and maintain our obedience. We must cease our own work but then embrace the deeds and work that God has for us. Remember, this letter was written to Jews who were accustomed to a busy schedule of God-works at the Feasts and the Temple. Now a Jewish believer and writer was writing them that Moses, Joshua and David did not lead God’s people to true rest. It was only in the gospel of Jesus that their rest could be found.

These Jews were considering “going back” to Judaism, but the writer was equating that with unbelief and disobedience.

As we end this second study, are you considering “Going back”? Did you begin your walk with Jesus in faith, only to find it hard? Are you disillusioned that some promises have lingered and some things of God too difficult? If you answer “yes,” then maybe it’s time to even rest from trying to “figure things out.” Maybe it’s simply time to rest from your labors and enter into the rest that God has for you.

May you have a restful and obedient week as you walk out the Today-word in your life!