



BETHEL  
PRESBYTERIAN

# MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## A Warning to the Church

It probably is no surprise to you but did you know that the Bible contains doctrines that are rather *difficult* to understand and at times hard to believe? For example,

- Luke 9:24 says that the one who would seek to save His life must lose it.
- In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 we read of the doctrine of inspiration, that God so worked in the life of the writer of Scripture such that what was written can be said to be completely God's word and yet completely the man's who wrote it!
- Christ said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves" (John 6:53). And then we read, "Many therefore of His disciples, when they heard this said, "This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?" (John 6:60)

Truly, the Bible contains many difficult and hard-to-understand truths. However of all the passages that I can think of, there are none more *threatening* than the ones that raise the question regarding the validity of our salvation. For example,

- Corinthians 13:5: "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you- unless indeed you fail the test?"
- 1 John 2:3-4: "And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him."
- John 15:6: "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned."

Now all of these passages raise these questions:

- How do you ensure that you are saved?
- On what basis do you consider yourself to be a Christian?
- What is it that separates you from the countless thousands who have participated in the Christian religion and yet themselves have perished?

I want to look at a text with you that not only asks but answers these very questions. The Epistle to the Hebrews was a letter written with three "Jews" in mind.

- First; the Jew who had accepted Christ as their Messiah.
- Secondly; the Jew who had rejected Christ as their Messiah.
- And thirdly; the Jew who had yet to consider that Christ was Messiah.

### **The Occasion for Warning**

Now to all three of these groups, a very important message or warning is sounded here in light of their Jewish past.

Hebrews 3:16-19, "For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they should not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief."

Often times, I am confronted by the skeptic who makes a rather interesting statement. They say this:

"If only I could see a miracle. If only I could behold one sign, then I would believe."

And yet, as this text rightly illustrates, seeing is not believing. Truly, this text details a rather shocking history. It describes the time when God's people were mightily delivered by God from the Egyptians! God softened the heart of the Pharaoh through the plagues! God divided the Red Sea and enable His people to cross on dry ground! God powerfully manifested Himself to His people in a way that has never since been repeated. And yet, in spite of this incredible history, God's people rebelled.

Hebrews 3:16, "For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses?"

Indeed, a study of the people of God during the time of the Exodus reveals a shocking truth. These people saw so much, and yet they rebelled so greatly! In fact, Paul picked up on this in 1 Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 10:1-5, "For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness."

And that is exactly the point of the Hebrew writer here. Notice the text again.

Hebrews 3:17-18, "And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they should not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient?"

Now the point here<sup>1</sup> is that this history should serve as a cogent reminder to each and every one of us that it is NOT true that the more of the workings of God that you see the more easier it is to believe. In fact, if the history of God's people reveals anything, it teaches that the more someone knows the greater his culpability and thus, the greater his sin.<sup>2</sup>

And that probably is why the account we are looking at this morning is so frequently referenced in the Bible.

- Psalms 95:7-11 recounts the same history that we have seen this morning as a means to warn God's people.
- The whole of Psalm 106 describes this same history as both a warning to God's people and a plea for God's continued help.
- As we have just seen, Paul in 1 Corinthians 10 uses this same example as means to warn his readers.
- In Acts 7:20-43, Stephen recounts this same history to his persecutors as a warning for them to repent.
- Finally here in Hebrews (3:7-4:2), we have the same history once again recounted as a warning to all who would consider themselves saved.

And all of this bring us to a very important question that the recipients of this epistle no doubt would have asked: What relevancy does all of this have on us today?

As Jews, are we not children of God? Are we not the chosen? Do we not know God's will? Approve of the things of God? Teach the lost? Correct the foolish? What's the point? Why the reminder?

## **The Relevancy of the Warning**

The answer to this brings us to the relevancy of the warning.

Hebrews 4:1-2a, "Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it. For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also..."

Do you feel the impact of this verse? It is akin to the "You're the man!" of 2 Samuel 12.

Hebrews 4:2, "...let us fear lest... any one of you should seem to have come short of [the promise of God]."

Reading Hebrews 3:17-18 you can just imagine the response of those listening as this epistle was read for the first time. "All of us are aware of the sordid history of the people of God who in their rebellion and wickedness rejected God in spite of the miraculous signs and wonders. However, we would not do such a thing. We are the people of God. We love the Lord."

Doesn't this sound familiar?

Matthew 23:29-30, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.'"

The natural inclination of the heart is to hear a rebuke directed at a crowd and immediately conclude that the message is intended for someone else. In light of this, the Hebrew writer here gives a solemn warning:

Hebrews 4:1, "Therefore, let us fear...": lit. "let us reverence" or "let us be afraid."

The idea here is one of sobriety and gravity. In light of the incredible history of the people of God at the time of the

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<sup>1</sup> Paul makes a similar point in 1 Corinthians 10:6

<sup>2</sup> Compare John 12:48

Exodus- a time when God's people had so much by way of proof and yet, rebelled so greatly let us who also have received the same promises NOT be complacent BUT carefully evaluate our standing before God.

Why? Notice the text.

Hebrews 4:1b: "...lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest [which clearly is a reference to salvation], any one of you should seem to have come short of it."

What an important warning. There has never been a time in Church history in which some of those identified as the people of God have not actively rejected the Lord they supposedly serve! In fact, we would be hard pressed to come up with an age in which the very ones who profess the Christian religion actually lived in light of their profession. Truly

- The Old Testament had its Korah's (Numbers 16) and Uzzah's (2 Samuel 6).
- The nation of Israel under king David had its Absalom (2 Samuel 15 & 16).
- The Apostles had Judas (Matthew 10:4).
- Paul had his Alexander the coppersmith who "...did [him] much harm..." (2 Timothy 4:14).
- And Peter warned of the horrible sin of Apostasy in 2 Peter 2.

Amazingly and quite shockingly it is possible for ourselves to witness the great and mighty acts of God and yet still reject Him. And thus, the Hebrew writer here warns His readers to fear.

Hebrews 4:1, "...lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest [which clearly is a reference to salvation], any one of you should seem to have come short of it."

Now all of this brings us then to the question of the hour. In light of the past history of mankind who in the face of redemption rejected it and the present salvation that we have heard and for which we ourselves hope what is the message of this text? What is its warning? What must we avoid? How ought we to ensure that we NOT participate in the sin of those in the days of the Exodus who forfeited the promise? And f forsook the Lord? BUT actually receive the salvation that we so highly prize?

## **The Content of the Warning**

The answer is found in the content of the warning. And yet before we read and discuss the "Warning" given here let me ask you the questions I posed at the beginning: How do you ensure that you are saved? On what basis do you consider yourself to be a Christian? What is it that separates you from the countless thousands who have participated in the Christian religion and yet they have perished?

Think about it for a moment, but don't look at your text. And while you are thinking, let me give you the answer that many today in Christianity would give to the question — On what basis do you consider yourself to be a Christian?

Many today would say, "Because..."

- I believe."
- I go to church."
- I am not that bad of a person."
- I generally do good."
- I have asked Jesus to come into my heart."

Or to address the question from another perspective: On what basis were those at the time of the Exodus cast away from God's presence? Why did God reject THEM?

Most today would say,

- "Because of disobedience!"
- In the Wilderness, they were not satisfied with the manna God had provided, but craved meat, Exodus 16.
- At Mount Sinai, God's people worshipped the golden calf, Exodus 32.
- When at first they were brought to the promised land, God's people rebelled again and requested that they be brought back to Egypt, Numbers 14.
- In Numbers 16, the people of God rebelled against Moses and many died.
- In Numbers 25, the people of God began worshipping the gods of Moab.
- And if you read Exodus and Numbers you will discover many more examples of God's people rejecting God and worshipping and serving themselves!

On what basis were those at the time of the Exodus cast away from God's presence? On what basis do I consider myself to be saved? Notice the answer that the Hebrew writer gave- you may be surprised!

### **The Cause of God's Rejection**

Hebrews 4:2: "For indeed we have had good news preached to us [In other words, we have been thoroughly introduced to the saving Gospel of Grace], just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard."

Do you see that which separates the true child of God from the false? The genuine believer from the one who is deceived? The true Christian from the Sham Christian?

It is NOT what they do, BUT who they trust! It is NOT their work for the Lord, BUT the Lord's work for them!

That is the point of this entire passage! The "good news" (Hebrews 4:2) that was proclaimed to the Old Testament Israelite during the Exodus was that the God of their fathers would bring them safely to the Promised Land and give them possession of it.<sup>3</sup> And thus, they needed only to

- Rely upon God.
- Cleave to Him.
- Devote themselves wholly to Him.

And yet, rather than cleaving to their God who had saved them from slavery they rejected Him because they considered themselves unable to defeat the inhabitants of the land. The Old Testament Israelite was disqualified from entering the Promised Land NOT because they failed to obey — after all

Deuteronomy 9:6, "Know, then, it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn people."

BUT more fundamentally, because they refused to rely upon their God as the only means of deliverance! P. E. Hughes put it this way:

"The consideration of this solemn possibility [of not receiving the promise], so startlingly illustrated by the fate of the generation which perished in the wilderness, should teach [us] to place [our] trust not in the smallest degree in [ourselves] but solely and completely in him who 'is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him' (Hebrews 7:25)."<sup>4</sup>

And so, the Old Testament Jew at the time of the Exodus was rejected by God NOT because they failed to obey or

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<sup>3</sup> Compare Exodus 19:3-6; 23:20-33

<sup>4</sup> P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary On The Epistle To The Hebrews*, page 156

to do good but because they refused to rely solely upon God!

Hebrews 3:12, "Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God."

Hebrews 3:19, " And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief."

Now brothers and sisters, how does a text like this apply to us? After-all aren't we Christians? Are not we correctors of the foolish? Don't we believe, go to church, and generally do good? Haven't we asked Jesus to come into our heart to save us?

If it is possible for a whole generation to be powerfully and miraculously delivered by the hand of God from slavery and yet still refuse to rely upon God don't you suppose that it is possible for us as well? Isn't it possible, in the words of Hebrews 6, to

- Have once been enlightened.
- Taste of the heavenly gift.
- Behold the powerful workings of the Holy Spirit as He transforms the lives of those around us.
- Hear and accept the word of God.

And yet never have been saved and thus fall away unto damnation?

Truly, it not only is possible, but Scripture records many who on the day of judgment actually will have witnessed all these things and yet still be damned.<sup>5</sup>

- On what basis do you consider yourself to be a Christian?
- What is it that separates us from the countless thousands who have participated in the Christian religion and yet themselves have perished?

It is NOT your good works or your record of few and ever decreasing sins. It is the possession of Christ's obedience as the satisfaction for the wrath your sin deserves, and thus the cleaving to the cross of Christ as the only basis for God's acceptance of you.

And so I say, "Cleave to Christ!" But you say, "I believe, but help my unbelief." By God's grace, Christ has an answer for you.

Luke 7:36-50 gives a commentary on what God considers to be true godliness. Christ is invited to dine with a Pharisee- who in his day was considered to be the

- Green Beret Christian.
- One who God truly approved of.
- The elite.
- The man of God.

And as He sat at the table a prostitute, and thus a sinner, came up behind Him and began washing His feet with her tears. Now because Christ didn't rebuke this sinful woman for touching Him, the confidence of this Pharisee that Christ truly was a genuine prophet is lost.<sup>6</sup>

The teaching of the Jews of Christ's day was that for God to accept a sinner they first had to clean their lives up. And thus, if Christ truly were a prophet of God, and thus a representative of God, He no doubt would have

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<sup>5</sup> Compare Matthew 7:24-25

<sup>6</sup> Compare Luke 7:39

rebuked this woman saying, "If you want to be with me, you must first forsake your sin!"

Now amazingly, rather than defending His identity as a prophet, Christ takes the opportunity to teach a lesson on what essentially constituted Godliness.

And so I ask you:

- What is the picture of a godly man?
- Whom does God accept?
- Who is the man that cleaves to Christ?

Luke 7:40-48: "And Jesus answered and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' And he replied, 'Say it, Teacher.' 'A certain moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. Which of them therefore will love him more?' Simon answered and said, 'I suppose the one whom he forgave more.' And He said to him, 'You have judged correctly.' And turning toward the woman, He said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears, and wiped them with her hair. You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.'"

The one who cleaves is the one who understands they are forgiven! And that represents the warning of the text we are looking at. The genuine child of God stands before God this day NOT because he obeys, serves, or does great things for God BUT because God has forgiven him for his sins on account of Christ! And thus we believe and rest upon God's grace and mercy and rely upon Christ and His work done on our behalf.

What is it that separates the genuine child of God from the apostate?

- Their Reliance upon Christ.
- Cleaving to the cross of Christ!
- Longing for their Savior.
- Reliance upon His work.
- Or as Hebrews 4:2 identifies it as, "Their FAITH!"

## **About Bethel Presbyterian Church**

*The Bethel Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word* is published regularly.

## **VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO**

Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10<sup>th</sup> Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

All our sermons can be accessed via the World Wide Web. The recording for this sermon (the last few minutes were not recorded because of a power outage during the sermon) and these notes can be found at [Reliance Upon Christ](#). The web address for all sermons at Bethel Presbyterian Church can be found out as follows: <http://bethelpresbyterian.sermonaudio.com>

## **About the Preacher**

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on February 15, 2009. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.