

Have You Believed?

Hebrews 3:16-4:7

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We will be looking at Hebrews 3:16 through 4:7. But of course, as always, if you do not have your Bible with you, we will also have the passage projected in front. This sermon comes in the middle of a section that stretches and begins at verse 7, where we began last week. And it will continue forward through the fourth chapter. But this intervening portion continues the invitation—the invitation that the preacher is giving to this body of Christ gathered in house-churches who are facing very real trial and also facing the real temptation of rebelling against the Lord in unbelief and rejecting the gospel. And so he calls them again, as with last week. He calls them with the warning—the warning of the deceit of sin. And it is a dire warning.

And I want to state, I am very much aware that these passages call us to a renewed seriousness of our faith. And some of these words are hard words. But one of the things that I want to be clear about, and something if you are not acquainted very well with the Bible I want you to be aware of, which may be a surprise to you. That the accent of the Bible's warnings fall far greater on the people of God than they do to those who do not believe outside God's people—whether it be Israel or the church. Whether it is the Old Testament or the New Testament, the vast majority of warning that comes from the Word, that comes even from Jesus's lips, and certainly the writers of the New Testament—those warnings fall more heavily upon the church of Jesus Christ, those who have professed belief. The same is the case in the letter of the sermon of Hebrews.

And so I want to be clear in saying that everything that is said by way of application is true for those of you who do not believe, who have not yet made a public profession of faith, who are here out of curiosity, here by invitation—whatever the case may be. But I will tell you, you are hearers of this Word in some sense as a second audience. The first audience of these verses are directed to the church of Jesus Christ. It is a sober reality that being members of the visible body of Christ universal does not mean that you are saved. It didn't mean it then, and it doesn't mean it now. And we cannot confuse the visible body of Christ—that is the representative bodies of the church of Jesus Christ around the world—we cannot confuse membership in that body and equate that with the absolute group of people who believe. There are members of this church and there are members of the universal body of Christ who have professed faith but who do not believe. We'll get to that in a few moments.

But I want to be clear in the event that it has not been clear that the accent is on those who are in the church of Jesus Christ. So with that in mind, I want you to hear again this middle portion of this narrative as the preacher of Hebrews gives it to us, beginning in verse 6 of chapter 3.

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.

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.” 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.” [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me.

Heavenly Father, Lord Jesus Christ, may your Holy Spirit fall fresh upon us. Will you, O Lord, as an under-shepherd of your people, will you began with me? For we are all alike, sinners in need of grace. May you renew. May you restore. May you ignite genuine faith, that we might know your rest. Help the teacher. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

So as we look at this passage together, you will see first in verse 16 through 4:3 the failure of unbelief. Secondly, participating in God’s rest, chapter 4 verses 4 and 5. And then finally, do you hear his voice. The failure of unbelief, participating in God’s rest, and do you hear his voice.

The failure of unbelief. As I said a little bit earlier, beginning in verse 16 on through verse 3 of chapter 4, he is again recounting and repeating himself in talking about the generation that was captured and enslaved in Egypt. But by God’s calling, by his election, by his power, he raised up Moses, sent Moses to Pharaoh. Pharaoh rejected it. And yet the Lord in his victory and salvation freed Israel from Egypt through the leadership of Moses. They were witnesses of things that would blow our minds. And yet, having been witnesses and those who experienced God’s mighty hand of salvation, as they entered into the land on the other side they were given a promise that they would receive a land—Canaan, the Promised Land. Yet they continued in unbelief.

And that unbelief reached its zenith when the Lord, having uttered his promise, sent representatives or spies from each of the twelve tribes to spy out the land of Canaan, which at that time was inhabited by enemies of Israel who were a mighty people and warriors. And those twelve spies came back to Israel, ten of which said, “We will utterly be destroyed. We will never win.” And yet two said, “Yes, this is the Lord’s promise. We will be victors.” But as an example of the zenith of their unbelief, they said, “Has the Lord brought us here to be buried in this desert? We want to go back to Egypt.”

And so the Lord made a promise. First, he was ready to destroy them at that very moment. Yet Moses interceded between God and his people. And he says, “Do not destroy them utterly this day.” And the Lord relented. He heard that intercession. And in his grace, he did not destroy them utterly that day. Yet he said, “They will not enter my rest. They will not enter the promised land,” of which God’s rest found an example, a real-life type, that is Canaan. Canaan was never meant to be the end game. Canaan was meant to be a place where God’s people would flourish awaiting the final rest of God’s redemption, God’s restoration of the world. And yet what we see is their unbelief is what led to failure.

But we need to be clear. Of course, what is this unbelief? Unbelief is also said in another way. It is said with the word *disobedience*. But we need to be clear here. If we misunderstand this, we will think that any sin will mean we will lose the opportunity to enjoy God's rest. But what is being spoken of here is disobedience and unbelief are synonymous. Disbelief is not something you accidentally do on a Monday morning. It's not a temptation that you fall into and you commit and then seek restoration of forgiveness. This is a heart-established attitude of will in saying, "I do not believe. I do not believe who God says that he is. And I do not believe the promises that he has given will come to fruition. I am rejecting it." That is a series of a million little decisions, of which disobedience and sin can be the first part. But the disobedience that is being talked about here is what leads to when we walk without repentance, without an acknowledgement that he is God and we are in need of forgiveness. It is a rejection of God and who he is and what he has said he has done, which is what I said last week—this is the unbelief that is being spoken of here.

But what is clear is after he's already announced the very difficult sentence that was given to Israel that wandered in the desert, that were the ones who were disobedient, who failed to enter because of unbelief—that is not a good, an easy thing to hear. Because the preacher of Hebrews is saying, "Guess what? I'm talking about them, but I'm really kind of talking about you." And what he does is what one of my professors said—he's giving us the two fists of the gospel. The one fist of the gospel says we are sinners desperately in need of grace because of our pride and unbelief. He announces that here. And that if you persist in your unbelief, you will not enjoy salvation with the Lord Jesus Christ. And yet as he announces that reality, he comes in with the other fist. And that other fist is the grace of the gospel. Because it's right here.

Look with me at verse 2. Actually, verse 1, "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," that's English for the Greek word for *gospel*, "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." So there were some who trusted, who had faith in what God was promising to do. And yet the vast number then, as is the case now, must enter into God's rest only by faith. And that faith is announced through the good news, the gospel, verse 2, of God's salvation, his rest. And so the antidote to unbelief is not your good obedience, being good boys and good girls. Thanks be to God.

The antidote to unbelief is the unbridled invitation of our Heavenly Father who is not defined by wrath, but God is love. But in his love, he announces the warning of his wrath but yet invites us to believe by faith—by faith, by trust—that God is who he says he is, that he is a God of grace. And this word, verse 1, *promise*, is the first time the word *promise* is used in Hebrews. It will then go on to be used fourteen other times, because it is central to this reality: the promise is not of our being good people; the promise is of God being a God of redemption and grace. And on this day, he announces to all of us, today is a day of his grace. And that grace meets us and invites us out of unbelief and to believe anew in who Jesus is and what God has done. It is the pride of unbelief that the antidote of the gospel seeks to undo.

But lest we forget that the gospel isn't the front door of God's house; the gospel is God's house. We don't believe on the gospel once and then never come to it again. The gospel becomes, as you've heard here said before, it is the A to Z of the Christian life. Which is why Paul would say of Peter in Galatians 2—he confronted Peter in his disobedience because he was acting one way before believers and another way before the Jews. And he says, "You are not living in line with the gospel." And what he is saying is the gospel is the good news, the way in which we live this life. And now the preacher of Hebrews is calling out to them in warning, "Your lives are not in line with the gospel. Know your own hearts. Is that the result of sin and disobedience? Or is that the result because you never have really believed?"

This is the question: have you ever actually really heard the good news of the gospel and therefore answered that call to belief? For the former, because you may feel as though you know that you believe, that you've been saved by grace and by faith, yet you find yourself, as we looked at last week, in the midst

of the deceitfulness of sin. Renewal is what is on offer and what we are invited to. Malcolm Muggeridge in another century said these words:

The saddest thing to me, in looking back on my life, has been to recall, not so much the wickedness I have been involved in, the cruel and selfish and egotistic things I have done, the hurt I have inflicted on those I loved—although all that's painful enough. What hurts most is the preference I have so often shown for what is inferior, tenth-rate, when the first-rate was there for the having. Like a man who goes shopping, and comes back with cardboard shoes when he might have had leather, with dried fruit when he might have had fresh, with processed cheese when he might have had cheddar, with paper flowers when the primroses were out. Alas, so much of my life has been spent pursuing this fictional good, and forgetful of the other, the real good, that is ever inspiring, ever renewed.

[Malcolm Muggeridge, *Chronicles of Wasted Time: The Infernal Grove*, 1973]

He wrote this in a book towards the end of his life. And the book is titled *The Chronicles of Wasted Time*. Much was the same—Billy Graham, who went to be with the Lord, when he recounted his life and asked, "What would you change?" He said, "I wished I had prayed more." All of us sin and fall short of the glory of God. All of us. And yet the day of renewal is today. We can be inspired to new obedience by the good news of the gospel. But even more so, you could have become a member and a professing believer and yet truly in your heart, you know you never really have believed—that God has merely become for you a crutch. But in your inner space, you know whether you have given your heart over to the Lord. And yet you live in pride. You make a show of it, but it isn't real. The invitation, again, is to us. And to you, today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart.

But then if we are invited out of unbelief into belief, in entering in his rest, what does participating in God's rest actually mean? Verses 3 through 5 get to this when he says:

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." And again in this passage he said, "They shall not enter my rest."

Participating in God's rest first means defining it. What is the rest? What we understand is that generation was given the promise that they would enter into Canaan. But Canaan was never meant to, as I said earlier, meant to be the end game. It was not the final salvation. It was a type. It was a foreshadowing of the final rest that would come at the end of time. But what is interesting here, what is being asked for—the land, while it is a type, is only a picture of what is the true rest. That true rest is this—it is nothing less than the full salvation from sin and the forgiveness of sin and the living of life by the grace of God in his Spirit. It is receiving new life, liberation from sin, forgiveness of sin, and the power to walk in faith.

Why is that so? How is that so? It is because Jesus Christ, who was himself as the Scriptures speak the second Adam. Adam failed to say in God's rest along with Eve in the Garden of Eden. Israel failed in its pursuit and belief in the fact of God's rest. Jesus Christ came as the second Adam, the true Israel, the true Israelite. And he came and he walked in obedience as both God and man, tempted in every way in which we are tempted. Yet he did not sin. And he walked in true faith—yes, faith—trusting in the will of his Father, giving up his spirit into the Father's hands, giving himself up to the will of the Father. That would mean that he, as an innocent one, would die on our behalf taking our sin upon himself and dying on a cross that was due to us and belayed in a grave as a common sinner yet without sinner. But on the third day, be raised again from death unto new life, and is now seated at the right hand of God the Father

Almighty. Which means he is participating in the rest of God. Why? Because it was spoken about in Genesis 2, that after the creation was done, on the seventh day, it says, "And God rested from his work." But it does not include, "And there was evening and there was morning, the seventh day." That is because God is in the eternal Sabbath. He has rested. Christ who is finished the work which was given to him has gone before us as our forerunner. And to believe in that rest is to believe on the one who has run before us. And so we have an opportunity to participate in that rest that is summarized in this gospel of salvation.

And so therefore, if that is what the rest is, when is the rest? It's already and not yet. Christ who was raised from the dead is now seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. It is finished. And as you come by faith, believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, the dawn of the final day has already come. But it is not yet finished. We are in the already of what Christ has done. We're in the already of being able to enjoy his forgiveness, the joy of fellowship with him, being united to him and his obedience and his righteousness, being declared righteous, being loved. We can enjoy that now. Yet we still experience the presence of sin and brokenness. It is not yet fully done.

Why? We know that because of these words in verse 3, "For we who believed entered that rest." That's a verb tense in Greek which is a futuristic present. It is finished, yet it is not fully consummated. And it will not be consummated until Christ comes again in the future. So we've only begun. But what is on offer? And what will be? As all things will be made new. And there will be no darkness. And the earth will be restored. And all sin will be completely undone. This is what it means to enter that rest.

So therefore, then, what does participation look like? It is, as the Heidelberg Catechism said on the –it's split into days, if you will. And on the 38th day, it talks about, what does it mean to participate in God's rest? It says this, that "that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works, let the Lord work in me through his Holy Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal Sabbath." What we do here gathered as God's corporate people to worship him, and what we do on this day, is not fully encompassed in the word *Sabbath* or *rest*. No day can contain the eternal Sabbath, the rest of God. This is but a picture. And we gather together to worship as a reflection of what we're to do with the rest of our lives—that whatever we do, we do all unto his name. Glory be to God. That all of our lives are spent resting. Resting. Resting.

We give up our pride by confessing it. We give up the illusion of control when we say, "Lord, tomorrow, Monday? That's not my day. This is yours. And I am yours. What would you have for me? Lord, these are not my relationships. These are ones you've put me into. Lord, may your will be done. Lord, this is not my job. This is your job. How can I glorify you through my work? Lord, these aren't my children. These are yours that you've put on loan to me. Lord, help me to love them as you love them. Help them to love you as your Son loves you. Lord, this is not our church. This is yours. Holy Spirit, fall fresh upon us, and remove from us the illusion of ownership and control. Release us from our persistent pride. Lord, have mercy. Help me to rest in you."

I finish with this. As you look at the final point in your outline, it says, do you hear his voice? You see here in these verses when it says in verse 6, "Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience," that's the synonymous word with *unbelief*, "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.'" Friends, may it not be lost on us that it was Jesus who would say and recorded in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 7:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" [Matthew 7:21-23, ESV]

To hear his voice and not harden our hearts, it is first the recognition—it is never, ever our work. It is only the work of God through his son, Jesus Christ. We present nothing to him that wasn't first his gift to us anyway. We are mere stewards, and we can never rest in our own laurels, even in our most obedient and glorious moment. It is all of grace.

In Revelation 3, it speaks of the church of Laodicea when he says, "You're neither hot nor cold. I will spit you out of my mouth." It is a warning to the church of Jesus Christ. May we never be found as lukewarm. What that is saying is that if you love the Lord Jesus Christ, may we be willing to be embarrassed by how excited we are because of the gospel of Jesus Christ—to sing of it, to pray it, to encourage it, to speak of it. May we be inspired by the saints that have gone before us, including our dear brother, Billy Graham, who when given an opportunity would speak always of the gospel of Jesus Christ. May we not look to him, but may we look to the one he spoke of, and never grow lukewarm about who Jesus is.

But this is a warning both in Matthew 7 and Revelation 3 and Hebrews 4. It is a warning first against what we might call "imitation faith." That is, when we conflate faith with knowing about God. When we conflate faith with knowing about God. I know a lot about President Donald Trump, but I don't know him. I know a lot about a lot, but I do not know it intimately. We can know a lot about the Scriptures. We can know a lot about theology. We can know a lot about Jesus and be as far from him as the most wicked of sinners you could think of. That is what imitation faith is. It is not first and foremost about intellectual knowledge. It is not about book understanding. It is about a relational reality where in your heart you've come to the place and to the moment where you say, "I've given up. Here is my pride. Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." That is faith. And the Lord will make us according to his good design. But you know what? You can be a child, and you can be an 85-year-old adult, and you can say the very same thing. Because it ain't never about us.

The other thing that it warns us about is insincere faith, meaning there is no real trust in the voracity of the Bible. There is no real demonstration that knowing Christ has actually changed your life. And there is no serious thought that salvation is by grace and not your own moral efforts. This is different than imitation faith. Because insincere faith actually wants to have all the trappings. You seek to show it. But once we begin to scratch the surface, grace isn't present in response or in your own dependence on the Lord. You can fool others. You can fool me. You can fool elders of any church. You can find a great testimony and just make it your own. Just go Google it. People do such things. You can fool us, but we cannot fool the Lord. And I, for one, am never impressed, ever impressed, with those who want to fake it. That's on you. That would be on whoever would want to fake it. I'm far more impressed with the sincerity of unbelief and even hostility against the Lord than those who would live in insincere faith.

What is called for here is integrity and sincerity and renewed recognition that we are only saved by grace. The question is, have you heard his voice? And if so, may we not harden our hearts. May we recognize our sin. May we confess our unbelief, our imitation or our insincerity. And God, the good news, invites us to his rest. What will your answer be? Let's pray.

Lord, I ask that you by your grace, by your grace, would you please work in us sincere, dependent faith, resting not in our pride nor in our morality but upon the grace of the gospel in Jesus Christ. Father, we ask that you would help us to share and to persevere in this rest. Lord, I ask for all who can hear my voice, for those who believe, Father, may you inspire and renew them through your Holy Spirit to walk in sincerity of dependence on Jesus Christ alone. For those who do not believe and those who now recognize that they've never been honest about their unbelief, Father, may your Spirit fall fresh upon them, and may you call them to new life and real rest. Lord, help us to hear your voice and to respond by your grace. It is in the matchless name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.