

Sermon for Sunday, October 7, 2012
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Jesus is Faithful; Are You?
Hebrews 3-4

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

A question: When is it time to persevere and when is it time to turn around? One year I was in Colorado to hike the mountains in an especially cold July. In fact, the night before my daughter and I set out to climb a great peak, a storm dumped snow on the top. A park ranger said, "In July, it can't be more than two inches. You'll be fine." No, the snow was eighteen inches deep. As temperatures climbed, the snow collapsed to slush, and became covered by icy run off. We slipped and fell over and over. It was a matter of time till one of us got hurt. So we stopped and turned around.

So when should we persevere; when turn around? Perhaps you want to make a point with a friend... You pray and plan what to say. They have no interest. They ask you to stop pushing. The more you talk, the less they want to hear.

Hebrews 3-4 is for people who faced that question. The Christians of Rome faced real danger. Chapters 10-12 mentions lost property, loss of security, bloodshed. If we read through the letter, it's clear that some thought of hiding their faith – by no longer attending gatherings. Others considered giving up the faith to avoid persecution. Many in the church were Jews who converted to Christianity and now considered going back. The prophets spoke for God, the sacrifices covered sin, Moses gave the law – do we really need Jesus?

People ask the same question today. In America, the reasons are different. We don't face violent persecution, but we experience pressures. Perhaps people laugh at us for being traditional, judgmental or conservative. Some elements of Christian ethics are very unpopular today, especially sexual ethics.

People think, "Do I have to follow the restrictions of a code I don't like? Do I want to say I'm a Christian if I refuse the code? It makes me feel guilty. Who needs that?" People even have problems with Jesus. People say, "He's great, but I have a hard time believing faith is the only way to God." You may have some of the same questions. If you think Jesus is good but not great or if you think of giving up the faith, then Hebrews is for you. Hebrews 3-4 challenges people who wonder, "Should I give up the faith?" But first Hebrews goes to Jesus.

1. Jesus is Faithful

When life is hard, it's far more painful if we think we're alone. The Christians in Rome felt alone. Sometimes we do too. But Hebrews 2 says believers are never truly alone. Jesus “tasted death” for us and he knows our life. He calls us brother, sister, child. He shares our humanity. So he is merciful and faithful toward us (2:17).

Hebrews 3:1 begins, "Therefore" – since Jesus is merciful, faithful, empathetic and since we are Jesus' brothers, “Fix your thoughts on Jesus,” *look at Jesus* - the apostle and high priest whom we confess – and trust. Who is Jesus?

Jesus is an apostle. An apostle is someone whom God sends on a mission. In the New Testament, an apostle usually is one of the twelve Jesus sent to represent him.

As apostle, Jesus is God's representative, to accomplish salvation, lead people to God. As *high priest* he is our representative. He takes our needs to God and offers God a sacrifice on our behalf. He is faithful to God, to fulfill his mission. He is faithful to us, presenting our needs to the Father.

Hebrews also compares Jesus and Moses, the greatest leader Israel had known. In fact, Moses and Jesus were alike in some ways. Both were faithful to God. Both mediated a covenant between God and Israel. Both led God's people. Both received help from angels. And both received revelation in a unique way – God spoke to Moses in his glory, "face to face" (Num 12:6-8).

But Jesus is superior to Moses in vital ways:

- Where Moses was faithful *in* God's house, Jesus *built* God's house, so he has greater honor (3:3).
- Where Moses was a *servant in* God's house, Jesus is *son over* God's house (3:6).
- Today, we are God's house – "*if we hold onto our courage and hope*" (3:6).

Now we hear the concern. Jesus has been faithful in every way. As apostle, he fulfilled his God-given mission. As priest, he was merciful, gentle, compassionate to the weak. He offered a sacrifice for sin and destroyed the power of death. He built God's house and rules it. He is faithful. But will we be faithful to him?

2. Will we be faithful?

It's clear that Hebrews Chapters 3-4 address people who considered quitting the faith. They're tempted to harden their hearts and rebel. See how often he mentions it:

- 3:7-8: The Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you hear his voice, *do not harden your hearts* as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert.”
- 3:11-12: As the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you *hear his voice*, *do not harden your hearts* as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert.”
- 3:15: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.”
- 4:7: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”

You see the quotation marks – he is quoting Psalm 95. It was a favorite song of worship that also mentions a painful time of rebellion:

“Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods” (95:1-3).

The Psalm continues, "Come let us bow down in worship... Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah" (96:6-7). That means two things. First, we must not come to worship as a ritual and then go out with a hard heart. Sadly, it's all too easy to make that mistake. Second, if we worship God, we persevere with God. At Meribah, Israel chose not to persevere; see the results.

At Meribah – Exodus 17

Shortly after God delivered Israel from Egypt, the people ran out of water. They accosted Moses and demanded, "Give us water to drink." Moses replied, ‘Why do you quarrel with me?’ - by demanding water *now* - Why do you put the Lord to the test?" (17:1-2).

But the people didn't listen. They grumbled and complained: "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" (17:3). They were about to stone Moses, until God told him to strike a rock and bring water from it.

The final lines explain the lesson: Moses "called the place Massah [testing] and Meribah [quarreling] because the Israelites quarreled and tested God saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?" (17:7). The Lord had parted the Red Sea, he had dropped manna from heaven, but they wanted to know: What have you done for us *lately*? They demanded something from God, right now.

That's a life issue. Faithfulness require patience, waiting. We want to solve our problems at work, in relationships - right now. Do something! Fix it! But the desire to rush rarely helps. Someone said: “God moves slowly; the devil hurries.”

A wounded party may wonder, "Do you want the problem to go away, to go back to your concept of normal, or do you care about me? You've changed, but will it last? Can I trust you? Will you be faithful? At Meribah, Israel wanted results now. They didn't want to be patient and faithful.

Hebrews quotes Psalm 95, which cites Meribah, but Hebrews seems to reflect on another failed test too (3:8-9). Numbers 13-14 describes the time when God told Israel it was time to enter the promised land. God told Moses to send twelve men to scout Canaan. They reported: As God said, the land "flows with milk and honey. But the people are tall and strong and the cities well-fortified.” Ten of the twelve said, "We can't do it."

Worse they grumbled against both Moses and God. They said, “We'll fall by the sword. Then our wives and children will be defenseless. It would have been better to die in Egypt. Let's go back to Egypt” (Num 14:1-4). So they refused to enter the land. God said, "OK, then you shall not enter my rest" (cf. 3:11).

Hebrews 3:11 quotes God's response: “So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.’” God swore Israel would not enter rest in the promised land. Hebrews quotes the Old Testament warning – "Do not harden your hearts.... See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving

heart that turns away from the living God (3:8, 12). The original says it different ways: "Don't even start to follow that generation (3:13, 15). And don't finish stepping away, to apostasy.

Again and again, he warns against a hard heart. A hard heart is insensitive. Insensitive to human needs and hurts (Matt 19, divorce); Insensitive to God's direction, God's leadership (Eph 4:18, Num 13-14). Stay tender, he says.

The burden of Hebrews – to warn and to encourage

Hebrews 1-3 has one great idea: Jesus is the Son of God, and very God. He created the universe and sustains it. He is greater than the prophets, because he is the final word of God. He is greater than the priests because he purifies our sins. Greater than Moses because he built God's house and rules it.

The author has a passion to lead his people to stay loyal to Jesus, to persevere when they don't *want* to persevere. He motivates his people to persevere in two ways. He says, "There is no one like Jesus, so you should stick with him." And he warns them – these are the consequences if you don't.

"Watch, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God." He is afraid they will leave the church physically because they have left God spiritually. To fall away is apostasy – a deliberate decision to reject God, leave the faith (3:12, Luke 8:13, 1 Tim 4:1). The author understands their fears. But running doesn't make things better, it makes them worse. In war, every sensible soldier is afraid. But desertion?

All through life, pressure-filled moments set us on edge. Some want to flee. The question is: Can you embrace and harness the moment of tension, the hour when you must perform for yourself and the people around you.

The soldier who feels no fear is not brave, he is a fool. The brave feel fear and discipline themselves to act correctly while afraid. He urges them to endure and tells them how in Hebrews 3:13: "*Encourage one another daily*, as long as it is called 'today.'" And what day is called "today"? Every day! He means – encourage each other always "that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

"Deceitfulness" implies that no one means to rebel. We're fooled, we fall into error. So we must watch for this deceit of sin – the invitation to give up. You hear it, don't you? "It's no use. Get on with life. It's too much." How can we stay faithful?

Hebrews names the source of faithfulness in Hebrews 3:14: We share in Christ, we partake of his life. We know we have come to share in Christ – if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

A challenging thought: we know we belong to Jesus if we persevere with Jesus. The promise is conditional. We know we're partners of Christ if we are still his partners at the end.

We don't like dire warnings these days. A theologian and cultural critic, Os Guinness, has noticed that warnings of God's judgment on sin have disappeared from our rhetoric. But Hebrews warns, even threatens. See how he does it.

He commands "Do not harden your hearts" (3:15). Then he asks a series of rhetorical questions. The questions are sharp, even rough, but Hebrews assumes that his people can answer correctly, as he poses a

string of rhetorical questions about faithless Israel and Moses, then concludes with an answer (Mark 8, Rom. 6.)

Who were they who heard and rebelled?
 Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt?
 And with whom was he angry for forty years?
 Was it not with those who sinned, whose *bodies fell in the desert*?
 And to whom did God swear they would never enter his rest?

So the disobedient "were unable to enter [the promised land] because of their unbelief. So they died in the desert. They died physically, but life in the promised land is a symbol or type of eternal life. In Hebrews 4:5 God says that those who fall away "shall never enter my rest." They perish in this life and forever, never tasting God's blessing and rest.

Hebrews 4:1-2 applies the lesson: 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... "those who heard did not combine it with faith."

First, God makes promises, but we must combine or mix them with faith. By itself sodium is a soft, dangerously volatile metal. By itself, chlorine is a toxic gas. Together – table salt. We need to combine or mix things properly. God's promises do us no good unless we combine or mix them with faith. The question is obvious: do you hear God's promises and receive them with faith? The promises stands, but we must receive it.

Second, it's possible to be "hang around" with the covenant family and fail to enter God's rest because of a lack of faith. Many Israelites did that very thing (4:1, 11). It's possible to grow up, go to church, come to meetings and still miss the gospel. If we hear the gospel, we have a responsibility to listen, investigate and believe.

Third, there is a moment of truth. Hebrews 4:1 begins, "Therefore let us fear" lest we repeat the error of Israel. They had the promises but never entered the promised land because they never shared the faith of the good scouts – Joshua and Caleb. The same thing could happen again.

Perhaps you have heard that we should never motivate through fear. Yes, there is danger in emotional manipulation. But let's not be wiser than God. The original is clear: "Therefore, let us fear." And we all know that fear can be a sensible, healthy motivator. A sales representative ought to have some fear of failing in the big presentation. A teacher should fear error, lack of preparation.

The first and last motivators for the Christians are love and grace, but there is a place for fear. Not terror. Not what theologians used to call servile fear: a servant's fear of the master's wrath and blows. But filial fear, the fear of disappointing people we love – parents, friends, respected leaders, is good.

Above all, there is fear of disappointing the Lord himself. As the Bible says, the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.

3. The shape and the rewards of a faithful life

What happens if we hear the promises with faith? First, we do enter and enjoy God's rest. Hebrews 4:3-11, like the whole Bible, names three kinds of rest:

First, God rested after creating the world. He worked, then rested and so gave us a pattern for life. It's so satisfying to complete our work, to do it well, then rest. There is more to God than his work and there is more to us.

Do you ever feel exhausted? Endless work is a leading cause. We need to take a walk, read a book or movie, lose ourselves in music, go out with friends and munch away, roaming from politics to jokes. It's an act of trust, and a shadow of the peace and rest God's people will enjoy forever (4:3-4).

Second, Hebrews names Canaan, the promised land, the place of rest from travel and hostility and insecurity. Canaan is a hint of our eternal rest. God gave Israel Canaan and the rest there points to eternal rest, the end of anxious toil. It reminds us of future rest (4:9-11). Here is a poem on the need, the way, of rest:

At least at night, let your heart have a rest
 At least at night, stop your career.
 Calm those desires that nearly madden you.
 See if you can manage to put your dreams to sleep.
 Yield yourself, body and soul, truly and completely, into God's hands!
 (Dom H. Camara, *Reasons*)

Jesus offers this rest to you. It is ours if we receive it with faith, because God's offer of rest remains. We have a love-hate relationship with perseverance. We love the idea of finishing a task, the feeling when we have finished. But in itself, finishing is another matter. Can you think of a project that's 50-80% done? You *can* finish, you have the skills. But you need time, energy, self-discipline, self denial.

Think of a project around the house, a new initiative at work, the last stages of a race, the last stages of a paper or thesis. Question: What does it take to get a Ph.D. or M.D.? People think of time, money, intelligence, but above all perseverance. Endurance is the core of every virtue. Consider:

- If you are patient for twenty minutes, are you really patient?
- If you can keep secret until there is huge payoff in telling, can you keep secrets? See, "I know you can keep a secret, it's the people you tell that I worry about."
- If you're generous, but only until someone takes advantage, are you generous?
- If you love your husband, wife or children until they irritate you, is it really love?

Sometimes we want to say "Enough." We want to stop working, stop a relationship. The Hebrews wanted to quit being Christians. It didn't look safe. Sometimes I think quitting is the great temptation of life. After fifteen years, Abraham wanted to quit waiting for child. After fighting Baal prophets alone, Elijah wanted to quit. "Let me die."

Society certainly makes quitting easy. Work is hard? Find another job. Church isn't satisfying; there are hundreds of others. Tired of your club? Try archery, juggling, origami, Zen veganism. Tired of a relationship? Get new friends.

Hear the message of Hebrews 3-4. He says: Listen to God's voice. Don't harden your heart. Don't presume that just because you have heard the story of redemption, just because you go to church, you have a relationship with God.

So what counts? The faithfulness of Jesus and his offer to be faithful to you. But you must respond with a faith that perseveres. Not the idea of persevering, but actual endurance. That counts more than ability, dreams, ideas or intentions.

I took my middle daughter on her first hike up a great mountain in Colorado when she was twelve years old. It was round trip of fourteen miles, a vertical gain of 5,000 feet. She was the youngest climber that day and we often lagged at the back of our group.

After three hours, we broke the tree line, and came to steepest part of mountain. She asked, "Are we going to make it?" A part of her wanted me to say, "No, we can't do this. Let's go back." But I'd seen her play soccer. I knew she could do it.

I said, "If we keep putting one foot in front of the other, we'll be fine. We can go slowly, but if we don't stop, we'll make it. So we kept walking, past a lot of people who *did* stop on that steepest slope. We kept going through the final ridge. It was fifteen feet wide, but the winds blew and the mountain swept away on both sides, and we were tempted to stop. But we kept on and soon reached the grand summit.

That's the Christian life – keep on going. Not alone, with grim determination, but with someone better than a father walking with us. The Lord Jesus himself walks with us, as we walk with him, assuring us, urging us on, showing us the path, until we reach the goal. We persevere with Jesus, till we reach his rest.