

Sermon Preparation Notes - Hebrews Chapter 3

The Structure of the Chapter:

- (vv1-6) Jesus is greater than Moses. The faithfulness of Jesus and Moses are a challenge to us and our response to the gospel.
- (vv7-11) Unbelief had serious consequences for Israel in the O.T., similarly it will have serious consequences for those who follow Christ.
- (vv12-14) A practical strategy against failure in faithfulness for the Church.
- (vv13-19) A sobering reminder that neither past blessings, nor past obedience, guarantee against future failure.

General Comments:

The author of Hebrews has already shown that Jesus is greater in glory than the angels (chapters 1 and 2). He now shows how Jesus is greater leader / prophet than Moses (chapter 3). He will then go on to show how Jesus is a greater High Priest than either Melchizedek or Aaron (chapters 4 to 10). Thus Jesus is shown to outshine the most powerful creatures in God's creation, the greatest leader of God's people and the greatest priest that ever mediated between God and his people.

This chapter begins by reminding the Hebrew Christians of the great calling and honour of the Christian life but it also reminds them that faithfulness is the key requirement in their response to Christ. The real and serious dangers of unfaithfulness (rooted in disbelief) are drawn out for them through a consideration of the failure of Israel to enter into the Promised Land.

A strategy for victory is outlined for the Hebrew Christians so that they might not fail as their forefathers did.

The chapter ends with another reminder of the serious consequences of a failure in faithfulness.

Verse by Verse Analysis:

(vv1-6) Jesus is greater than Moses.

«*Holy brothers*» - This is both a term of endearment and a reminder of their consecration and calling. Holy means set apart for the use of God.

«*Who share in the heavenly calling*» - A reminder of the glory that is potentially theirs in Christ and that it is heaven and not earth which is their true home. Therefore it is heaven that should be their primary concern.

«*Fix your thoughts on Jesus*» - This is the only way that they will successfully live out their calling and gain the prize of heaven. The word translated «fix your thoughts on» means «to look at», «to consider», «to contemplate in order to learn something from». In 2:9 he has already stated «But we see Jesus» and drawn out what the example of Jesus means for man. What Jesus tells us about our true reality and our true calling. Here again he encourages the Hebrew Christians to meditate upon Jesus as part of their normal spiritual discipline.

«*Apostle and High Priest*» - This explains why they should fix their thoughts on Jesus. It reminds them why and how Jesus is going to help them and sustain them in their calling and bring them to glory. Jesus is their apostle - a messenger sent from God and their high priest - a mediator between God and man.

«*Whom we confess*» - Jesus alone is the source and substance of the Christian faith. Their entire faith is a response to this historical person and to his life and teaching. Confession is also a public act, a public declaration. These Hebrew Christians are in a context of difficulty and opposition but the author pulls no punches - spiritual success will require courage and will have a cost.

The author compares the faithfulness of Jesus in fulfilling the mission God gave him, to that of Moses. The author could have pointed out Moses' failures, but he does not do that. Moses was considered by the Jews to have been the greatest of men. The author, probably a Jew himself, does not therefore speak derogatorily of Moses. He will establish Christ's superiority to Moses not in highlighting Moses' times of failure in comparison to Christ's complete faithfulness, but through the more significant fact of Jesus' closer relationship to God.

He cites Numbers 12:7 where God himself testifies to the faithfulness of Moses and hence his superiority to Aaron and Miriam who were trying to usurp his place of authority over the nation. The fuller context of the Number 12 citation reminds us of the similarities between Moses and Jesus. Both Jesus and Moses had performed signs and wonders. Both Jesus and Moses enjoyed astonishing intimacy with God. No prophet was closer to God, or enjoyed that intimacy for longer than Moses (Deut. 34:10). Thus no-one has a greater claim to rival Christ than Moses.

Verses 3 to 6 outline the author's argument as to why Jesus should nonetheless be considered superior to Moses. Verse 3 is also an indication of what Hebrew Christians should specifically think about as they consider Jesus - his faithfulness to the one who called / appointed him. They are currently 'wobbling' in their faithfulness to the one who called them. The author challenges them by reminding them that both Christ and Moses remained faithful. The only reason that these Hebrew Christians existed as Jews was because Moses had remained faithful. The only reason that these Hebrews had become Christians was because Jesus had remained faithful. But what will they do in their turn?

The author's argument for the superiority of Jesus is based on the greater relation that he has to God. Moses was a faithful servant in God's house but Jesus is the son and heir who is over God's house. Moses had seen God's glory (Exod. 33:18-34:8), but Jesus is the radiance of God's glory (Heb. 1:3) and Jesus is crowned with glory (Heb. 2:9).

Note that Moses is not being insulted in being called a servant. The servants of a great man had considerable social status in the culture of the time. Also the word used for servant speaks of someone who acts as a companion, as an attendant and does not therefore describe a mere slave.

So whilst Moses is worthy of honour and respect as a faithful servant of God, as the greatest prophet and greatest leader of the people of God, Jesus yet excels him because he has a closer relationship to the Father to whom they both relate.

Mention is made in verse 5 of Moses testifying to what would happen in the future. This is a reference to God's promise to Moses that one day he would send a 'new' Moses (Deuteronomy 18:17-18). This prophecy was clearly fulfilled in Jesus.

This inference of a continuity between the person of Jesus and Moses is further developed and broadened. Already Jesus' relation to Israel has been inferred (2:16) - it was Jesus who helped Abraham. Now it is stated explicitly. If we are ruled by Jesus, who is over the house of God, then we are automatically part of that house. This house has been built through Christ, first taking hold of Abraham (2:16), and established through the faithfulness of Moses as servant of the house. Thus everything spoken to the people of God in the O.T. also applies to Christians now.

A strong qualification is appended to this statement of our identity as members of God's house - *«if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast»*. As 2:1 reminded us of the danger of 'drifting away', this verse reminds us of the necessity of 'keeping hold'. Perseverance is the sign of membership of the household (c.f. Matthew 10:22, Rev. 17:14). Only those who are courageous and persevere to the end are truly of Christ and his household.

The Christian hope is what inspires courage and maintains perseverance and it is this hope in which we can take pride. It is important to note that these Hebrew Christians live in a context where Christ is scorned for having been crucified. Crucifixion was the most shameful of deaths for both Romans and Jews. For Romans it was reserved for the worst of criminals and could not even be applied to a Roman citizen. For Jews it was a sign that someone is under the curse of God (Deut. 21:22-23). Thus the Hebrew Christians need encouragement to take pride in what Christ did on the cross, to see it as the glory of the Christian faith, not as the shame of its founder.

(vv7-11) Failure in faithfulness, an example from the history of Israel.

Having compared Moses to Jesus the author will now set up a comparison between the groups of people that these two faithful individuals led. Firstly, in verses 7 to 11, he recalls how those who Moses led failed to be faithful in their response to God and to the leadership of Moses. Next he will evoke the contemporary situation of the Hebrew Christians who are being led by Christ and challenge them not to repeat the mistakes of their ancestors.

A citation from Hebrews 95:7-11 is introduced by the words, «So, as the Holy Spirit says:». This reminds us that for the author of Hebrews the word of God is inspired and continually vivified by the Holy Spirit. Though this psalm was written hundreds of years previously, the Holy Spirit still speaks through its words into the specific situation of the Hebrew Christians - and also to us today.

The psalm cited has two halves (vv1-7 and vv8-11). The first half begins with a call to praise followed by a list of the qualities and greatness of God. Thus the psalmist calls the people to praise God and then indicates to them why God merits their praise. Who is God and what has he done that should call forth a

response of praise from the people of God? The second half of the psalm is a sad reminder that Israel did not always respond to God in this appropriate way. Rather she was often faithless and rebellious towards God and suffered the wrath of God in consequence.

The application to the present context is therefore very apt. Here are Hebrew Christians who have encountered the glorious message of Christ and who have experienced his presence amongst them by the power of his Spirit. Their duty is therefore to live out an appropriate response of faithfulness and praise. But will they? Or will they repeat the failure of their ancestors?

The words «rebellion» and «testing» are the words used in the Jewish scriptures of the time (the Septuagint or LXX) for the place names «Meribah» and «Massah» (Exodus 17:7). Two words that very acutely recall the faithlessness and rebellion of the people of Israel.

Testing has two aspects. There is the aspect of God allowing bad things to happen to his people in order to determine whether they will remain faithful. There is also the aspect of Israel testing the limits of the tolerance of God through their continual faithlessness. Thus it can be seen that the whole of the 40 years of desert wanderings can be seen as a time of testing.

Also, the time of writing of this book was around 40 years after Jesus' crucifixion. So there is a poignant similarity in the people of Israel, who were faithless under Moses' leadership for 40 years and these Hebrew followers of Jesus who are likewise tempted to be faithless after 40 years.

The Israelites' problem is specifically stated as a heart problem. A problem that has three elements:

Hardness - Their hearts, (in middle-east culture the place of knowledge and of choice rather than emotion), were stubborn and opposed to God and his ways. There was in their inner being a continual refusal to hear and to obey God.

Straying - Their hearts were wavering in their commitment towards God and had a continual tendency to go off in the wrong direction.

Dullness - Although time and time again the people of Israel saw God's works, they continually failed to come to understand his ways. This was not due to their ignorance, but to their refusal to learn.

Their eyes had seen God's mighty acts. Their ears had heard God's voice. Their bodies had received God's miraculous provision. Yet their hearts remained closed and cold towards God. This is termed rebellion towards God.

God is not indifferent towards human sin. God is angered by their rebellion and swears an oath that they shall not enter into the land. Note the seriousness of this. God had promised on oath to Abraham that he would bring the people of Israel into the Promised Land. However, due to their rebellion and faithlessness, this generation are nonetheless excluded from the experience of the fulfilment of that promise. God can and will therefore revoke his promises to those who prove to be unfaithful.

«Rest» speaks of rest from their wanderings in the desert, but is also contains a reference to the Sabbath rest of God. Revealed in the creation, enshrined in the covenant, foreshadowed in the Promised Land, and which will be ultimately fulfilled in the final coming of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 11:28-29, Revelation 14:13).

C.S. Lewis noted with alarm that there can never be true rest for a Christian this side of heaven.

If a man can't be comfortable and unguarded, can't take his ease and "be himself" in his own house, where can he be? That is, I confess, the trouble. The answer is an alarming one. There is nowhere this side of heaven where one can safely lay the reins on the horse's neck. It will never be lawful to simply "be ourselves" until "ourselves" have become sons of God.

[First and Second Things, C.S. Lewis, Fount, 1985, p60]

Note that there is a possible alliteration in considering this passage. Verse 7 speaks of «revelation», verse 8 of a «response» of «refusal», verse 9 shows us that its nature was «repeated», verse 10 indicates the «root problem», verse 11 shows the «result» which was «no rest».

(vv12-15) The Way to Victory

The author outlines a way in which the Hebrew Christians can avoid repeating the faithlessness and failure of their ancestors. His methodology involves individual and corporate action:

«See to it» or «Watch out!» - negatively, each member requires heart monitoring for signs of sin, unbelief and turning away.

«Encourage one another» - positively, the community needs to practise daily mutual encouragement.

A continual practice of attentiveness and alertness by all and for all. Thus deep, daily Christian fellowship is a bulwark against sin and apostasy. Christianity is communal. We will be saved in community or not at all.

In 2:1 we learned of the danger of «drifting away» from the truth, here we learn of the danger of «turning away» from the living God. Drifting away from the truth is also an act of turning your back on the truth-giver. It is not rebellion against dead doctrine but a living person. Man's fundamental sin is living as if God did not exist.

They must therefore watch out for key symptoms of spiritual disease, again as for the Israelites of old, the heart is the key area of concern;

«a sinful, unbelieving heart» - The Israelites of old did not fail to believe in God, they failed in loyalty and obedience to God. It is faithlessness that is the key point of spiritual failure - not trusting in God.

«a hardened heart» - Sin is deceitful and causes a hardness of heart towards God. It achieves this by misrepresenting God, by causing us to question his love and his wisdom. If we allow these sinful thoughts to remain in our minds they will poison us towards God. This will then make us more and more resistant towards his will. This, in turn, will block our spiritual progress, undermine our growth in spiritual fruit and ultimately estrange us from God.

The author holds out the glorious calling of the Christian, not merely to be partners with Christ, but to share in Christ. The phrase «we have become» reminds them that they have become sharers in the messianic reality not by their birth as Jews, but by their baptism into Christ. They once weren't sharers, but now they are.

To this glorious calling is attached a serious reminder that participation in Christ is conditional. In verse 6 he reminded them they were part of Christ's house if ... they hold on to their courage and hope. Here they share in Christ if ... they remain faithful to the end.

In fact it is their faithfulness to the end that demonstrates the reality of their sharing in Christ. Only those who remain faithful to the end are truly of Christ (c.f. Revelation 17:14).

That confidence that they first had in the Christian gospel, a confidence which had been sufficient to bring about their conversion, a confidence which had enabled them to stand in the face of persecution, that confidence needs to be maintained to the end.

This section on warnings against unbelief and strategies is opened and closed with the same quote from Psalm 95:7,8. A salutary reminder of the failure of Israel in the past and the serious consequences of that failure.

(vv16-19) The Consequences of Failure

The chapter closes with another warning. Three questions are asked, all of which refer to those who were delivered out of slavery in Egypt, but who failed to enter into the Promised Land. These people were in a position of spiritual privilege. They had heard God speak. They had seen God at work. They had known the presence of God with them in miraculous ways. They had made a good start in following Moses as he led them out of bondage. And yet they ultimately failed. They never put their total faith in God. This grievous failure led to grave consequences as God punished them for it.

The analogy to the Hebrew Christians is evident. They too were in a position of spiritual privilege. They too had started well. They too had seen God at work and experienced his presence with them. The question hangs, "What will they do now?" Will their unbelief block their entry into the rest of God?

Coming out of Egypt is not the same as entering into the Promised Land. We need to press on, to persevere, thus to obtain the prize (Philippians 3:14).

Note that the people of Israel were «not able to enter». Sin is self-defeating, it in itself prevents people from entering into God's rest. Unbelief robs us of what should be ours.

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