

Hebrews 3:7-4:13

We are continuing this morning in our study of the letter to the Hebrews, picking up at chapter 3, verse 7 and working through to chapter 4, verse 13. Now, in the first part of this letter we have paid careful attention as the writer has worked hard to demonstrate the uniqueness and superiority of Jesus. The reason he does this is because the people to whom he is writing are under a great deal of pressure to abandon their Christian faith and, as part of that process, to change their minds about Jesus. Since many of them had apparently converted from Judaism in the first place, or were at least very familiar with it, the abandonment of their Christian convictions would likely mean *returning* to their former beliefs and practices.

At the same time that all of this was going on, there were other things “in the air” so to speak, strange ideas and teachings, including teachings about angels which were filtering in and making some inroads amongst the believers. One teaching in particular - that angels would have a unique and leading role in the world to come - that teaching seems to have been in the mind of the writer to the Hebrews as he composed this letter.

And so when the writer of Hebrews takes up his pen, he has as his main agenda addressing some of these ideas that were floating around and, more importantly, *encouraging* these believers who were under such great pressure to abandon their faith. He wants them to hold on to Jesus, to not waiver, and to not lose the confidence that they used to have in him and which, for some, seems to have been badly shaken.

The approach that the writer has taken to achieve these goals, thus far, has been to show how Jesus is superior to anything they might be tempted to abandon him for. As the supreme revelation of God, as the exact likeness of God, the word that he brings is fuller and clearer than anything they have received through the prophets. Further, the writer has shown how Jesus is clearly not an angel and is superior to them in every way. Still further, as one who was fully God and yet fully man he was/is superior to any other high priest or any other possible mediator between God and man. Finally, as we saw last week, he is superior even to one as faithful and greatly used of God as Moses.

Now along with these demonstrations of Jesus’ uniqueness and superiority, there are warnings that are mixed in amongst it all - strong words that caution the readers to pay attention to what they have already heard and to what they are hearing now in this letter. The first main block of these warnings appeared in chapter 2, verses 1-4, which we saw a few weeks ago.

The second main collection of both warnings and encouragements are found in the verses before us this morning. Admittedly, this is a larger section than what we have been working with up to this point. However, I wanted us to look at the whole things as a unit because I believe it does have a common theme and so works better if we try and see it as a whole. Now, of course, this means we will have to move more quickly, and we will necessarily miss some of the details, but on the whole, I think we will be better served. So, with that little introduction, let’s pray, and then we’ll read the passage together.....

(Read Heb 3:7 - 4:13)

Now, that's quite a mouthful and those of you who are regulars here know how I can blather on about a single verse for ridiculous amounts of time and, as a result, my be quite concerned at this point. But, fear not, we will make quicker work of this than you might think because, as I have already said, I believe there is a great deal of unity in this section. So, keep your chin up. There's hope.....

Now, the structure of this morning's message comes in two main parts. For the first part, I want to look at this entire section of Scripture as a whole, breaking it into some smaller parts, and then summarizing them and showing how they connect with one another. Hopefully by doing this you will gather something of the basic flow of thought. For the second part of the sermon, I want to come back and simply highlight four (4) things from within these verses, four among many that *could* be highlighted but which, I think, if we just stick with these four, will be helpful enough. More to the point, I think and hope that taking this approach will do for *us* what these words were intended to do for their original readers. Firstly, then, let's have a quick, birds-eye view of 3:7 - 4:13 and how it all seems to work.

Verses 7-11 form the first sub-section and they begin with the word "therefore" which, as we've seen previously, always sends you scrambling backwards to find what is the line of thinking for which these words function as some sort of conclusion. And for this purpose, I think we need look no further than 3:1-6.

In 3:1-6, Jesus is shown to be superior to Moses and vs 5-6 are the conclusion of all this. Because Jesus is superior then, rather than walk away from him, the readers of this letter are urged to *consider him* carefully, and especially to consider the fact that while Moses was a faithful servant *in* God's house, Jesus was a faithful Son *over* God's house. The writer then brings all this home to his readers by assuring them that they *do* and *can* belong to this house which God has built and *over* which Jesus rules *only* if they hold fast to their confidence and continue boasting in their hope. What is this confidence and hope? Clearly in the context of the letter these things can only refer to Jesus who is the focus of everything said up to this point. They must hold fast to Jesus and to the things they had *first* and *originally* been taught about him. They must place all their hopes *on him*. They must have complete confidence *in him*.

And so, in light of all that, vs 7-11 are urging the readers who have trusted in Jesus to not harden their hearts and be like some of God's people in the past. Now the verses quoted here come from Psalm 95 which, if you read it, talks specifically about the rebellion of God's people that takes place in Exodus 17 at Meribah. So, the rebellion the writer of Hebrews has in mind is probably specifically *that* but also more generally seems to be the whole generation of God's people in the days of Moses and Joshua - a generation that wandered and were lost in the wilderness because of their disobedience. God had revealed himself *clearly* to these people through his servant Moses, but they rejected this and grumbled and complained and doubted God when things were tough.

The writer of Hebrews is urging his readers to *not* imitate *that* by doubting and losing confidence in Jesus, who is greater than Moses and who revealed God more clearly than Moses ever could. That's what verses 7-11 are saying. Verses 12-15 simply strengthen this warning and urge the readers to assist one another in holding on by daily encouraging one another to maintain their confidence and hope in Jesus.

Following that, verses 3:16- 4:2 drive this same point home even *more* forcefully and are intended to shake the recipients of this letter from any sort of false or foolish belief that these warnings are not really meaningful for them. These verses do this by simply making the point that the people in the OT who were faithless and disobedient were the last people you would have expected to be that way. Why? Because they were the same people who had *box seats* to God's great miracles of deliverance through Moses. If people like *that* could be caught in unbelief and disobedience then the readers of this letter surely ought to take note and not think for a moment that they were above these things. To be sure, the promise of God's rest was still open, but they must respond in faith to this news or they too would miss out on God's rest.

Now this "rest" that has been spoken of has not really been clarified thus far in the passage but in the next section, Hebrews 4:3-10, we get some insight into what the writer is talking about. In the second part of the sermon this morning, we'll look at that in more detail, but for now simply note that the writer links the rest of God - in creation - with the temporal rest of the nation of Israel - in the promised land - and then beyond that with the permanent, "sabbath rest" that is heaven, and which is in the future, still to come.

This, in fact is the main point that is made in this section as the writer uses Psalm 95, to make the point that - if the "rest" that Joshua achieved by leading God's people into the promised land was IT - if that was the ultimate and final rest that God had for his people - then King David would not have written the words that he did, in Psalm 95, many years afterward - words which are essentially inviting God's people in David's day to not harden their hearts and to enter into the "rest" that God still had on offer for his people. Taking a cue from David, the writer of Hebrews does the same thing here - urging his readers to not harden their hearts against Jesus, and so miss out on the heavenly, Sabbath rest that still remains for the people of God in his day, and in every age.

Finally, Hebrews 4:11-13, close out this section with one more appeal to God's people to not miss out on the rest available to them by becoming disobedient which again - in the context of these verses - would refer, in the main, to their losing confidence in and falling away from Jesus. The very familiar verses 12 and 13, which may seem a little abrupt at first, actually fit in quite well with what is going on here since they remind the readers of the ability of God's word to cut to the heart, to reveal who and what we are at the core of our being, and to render us, therefore, accountable and without excuse before God. This is the very word of God which the writer of Hebrews has been referring to all along in this letter. And it is the word of God which he has just quoted to them again - from Psalm 95 - saying, "Today, if you hear his voice, *do not harden your hearts*". This is his plea to his readers, to not rebel, to not harden their hearts, to see how the Scriptures reveal Jesus as prophet, as high priest, and as the reigning Lord, and as the divine-human mediator, as the only one who can deliver on the promise of rest and bring it to fulfillment.

That, in a nutshell, is what these verses are about - an extended warning to the recipients of this letter to *not* harden their hearts, and to *not* let their confidence in Jesus be shaken but to hold on to him because the rest and peace that Moses promised and which Joshua led the people of God into - as good as it was - was only a shadow of the final, fuller, completely satisfying rest that God offers *in* and *through* Jesus. God has clearly revealed this in his Word, and this Word has become flesh, and it is a word that cannot be ignored and which will go straight to the heart of who you are, and leave you without excuse before God, if you disobey it and abandon Jesus.

Now, with that overview in mind, let's go back very quickly and pick up a few points for further consideration.....

The first thing I want you to notice is that *the warnings in this passage are real, because the danger they speak of is real*. As we saw when we looked at chapter 2, verses 1-4, the writer of Hebrews is not just playing semantic games when he talks about people falling away. He is not warning them about a danger that doesn't actually exist. He is warning them about a *real* danger and a *real* possibility. Now, of course, it's not a real possibility for those who are truly *in Jesus*, but it *is* a real possibility for those who are *in the church*, and who appear to be in Jesus but who, as subsequent events may reveal, were never *really* his, at all. How do we know which is which, and who is who? *Perseverance*.

The person who still loves Jesus tomorrow, is the person who is truly his today. The person who still loves and pursues Jesus a year from now, is the person who is truly his today. The person who is still pursuing Christ 30 years from now, is the person who is truly his today. The tale of time reveals the genuineness, or otherwise, of our faith. So, brothers and sisters, take these verses to heart,

3:12 - "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God...."

4:1 - "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..."

4:11 - "Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience..."

The second thing I want you to notice is how the core problem revealed in these verses is *unbelief* and then notice the connection between *unbelief* and *disobedience*. Look at 3:16-19, again,

*"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 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**...."*

Now, if you're not familiar with the Old Testament, then you might not fully understand the context of these verses. But basically what happened was this: God delivered his people from their slavery to the Egyptians by doing all sorts of amazing things through his chosen servant at the time - Moses. Once the people were free, and traveling through the wilderness, they constantly grumbled and complained about how hard their life was - as if the God who had just done these amazing things to set them free could not now be trusted to get them to where they were going, or to look after them on the way.

Anyway, this huge mob of grumpy people gets through the desert, all the way to the edge of the land that God had promised them, and to which he had now led them. Before entering the land, they sent in some spies or scouts to see what they could expect to encounter upon entering because, after all, it was not a *vacant* land but was inhabited by all sorts of peoples. Well, the spies make their trip and upon returning, with a couple of notable exceptions, they tell the people that there are giants in the land and that there are ferocious people and that they have no hope whatsoever of being able to successfully enter and take the land.

And so they doubted God, and as a result of their *unbelief* they *disobeyed God* by not entering the land. The result of this was that they were consigned to wander in the wilderness for 40 years so that the entire generation of people that *should* have entered the land would now die without ever seeing it. Instead of taking the land themselves, their children and grandchildren would now take it.

So we see here this close connection between unbelief and disobedience. This is the reason why the writer of Hebrews does not say what we *expect* him to say in verse 19. In the verse just before 19 he says, "And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were *disobedient*?" And then he goes on in verse 19 and says this surprising thing. What you expect him to say is, "So we see that they were unable to enter because of *disobedience*"

But he doesn't do that. He says they were unable to enter because of their *unbelief*. Why? Because there is this close connection between the two and because he knows that it was the unbelief that led to the disobedience among the people in Moses' day. But not just in Moses' day, the writer of Hebrews knows that this same dynamic is operational in his own day, and indeed in every day. As a result, he wants his readers to see that if they do not hold fast to Jesus, if they begin to doubt him or lose confidence in him - then faithless disobedience will be the inevitable result, and they will find themselves cast out - like the people in the wilderness.

You and I need to take these things to heart as well. Because what this means is that since unbelief and disobedience are connected, then dealing with our sin is never *just* about correcting our behavior. It is never just about stopping ourselves from doing bad things, or starting to do good things. That sort of restraint and pursuit is certainly part of the whole picture, as Galatians 5 makes plain enough, but by itself it is insufficient.

Lurking behind or alongside our specific disobediences is a more fundamental problem of *unbelief*. There are truths which we are doubting, realities that we are denying and which lead us to disobey in the particular ways that we do.

And so, for example, we need to address the fact that we are all liars and so we do need to stop lying to one another. But we have to go deeper and ask ourselves *why* we lie in the first place. Or, to use another example, we have to control our tongues and stop slandering one another - but we have to also go beyond that specific disobedience to ask why it is that we feel the need to do this - to slander people. We have to root out the unbelief that lies *behind* the disobedience.

And what you find when you start doing that sort of thing is that certain common themes keep coming to the surface. You discover that often what you doubt is *the goodness of God*. Or you *doubt His love for you*. Or you *doubt his wisdom* or his *power*. You doubt that he knows *what you need, when you need it, and in what proportions*.

In short, ultimately, all roads seem to lead to some sort of doubt about God and his person and his ability to deliver on his promises. And so, as we are confronted and brought face to face with our sin, we need to respond not only to our specific disobediences, but we also need to repent of the unbelief that is driving that disobedience. We need to address the idolatry that is under the surface - the approval seeking, the control seeking, the success seeking - whatever we're worshiping, whatever we're feeling that we simply *must* have because the Gospel is not enough, *whatever it is* that is keeping the fuel tank of our disobedience full.

And even though all of that is hard and ugly and not fun to deal with - here's the beautiful thing. Because the Gospel *is* enough, then it is enough to cover you, it is more than enough to deal with your faithlessness and your doubt, it is bigger than your biggest sin, and deeper than your deepest failure, and surer than your gravest doubt. So, you pick up that whole great bit mess - both your *unbelief* and your *disobedience*, and you take it to the cross, where there is mercy beyond your wildest dreams.

The third thing I want you to see this morning, is not only that the warnings are real, and the connection between unbelief and disobedience, but I also want you to see *the necessity of the church*. Look at 3:12-13 again,

*Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. **But exhort one another every day**, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin....*

The writer of Hebrews wants his readers to exhort or encourage one another *every day*. He clearly sees that within the community of God's people, there is a real responsibility that we have toward one another, but not *just* a responsibility - a *privilege* - a privilege of being used of God to help a brother or sister stay faithful, to keep trusting in Jesus, to not lose hope, to not wander or drift away. It is along these same lines that the writer of Hebrews gives a similar instruction later on, in chapter 10, one that is familiar to many of you,

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near...

You see, the writer knows that he is addressing a *community* of believers - not just a bunch of individualists. He knows that if a person is being tempted to turn away from Christ, then that temptation is not happening in a vacuum. He knows that if a person suddenly stops showing up, or cuts off ties, isn't around anymore - none of that happens in a vacuum. None of that happens in isolation. It happens in the context of a community. He knows that wherever you see one person drifting away from a community of faith - *there are at least ten people watching it happen.*

Brothers and sisters, please hear this. Because we all have a responsibility here. There are people who have drifted and wandered away from this congregation. There are people who are in the *process* of drifting away from this congregation. They're cutting ties, they're not around as much, there's something going on. And, of course, that is always going to be the case in the church. This sort of thing will always be going on, until Jesus comes back.

But let me tell you what *doesn't* have to go on until Jesus comes back. We don't have to just stand around and watch it happen. It's a sad day when people leave. But just as sad, for me, is when I am eventually able to track some of these people down and I talk to them about why they left and what happened, etc., and I discover that as they were leaving - nobody came after them. Now, I'm not so naive as to believe that's always the truth. Sometimes people say that nobody came after them when in fact a number of people did.

But, you know, sometimes it *is* true. And it ought never be true. Sometimes people drift away. Sometimes people's hearts are becoming hard and cold, and they are more and more captivated by the deceitfulness of their own sin, and 15 people will notice - and will have 15 different ways of talking themselves out of doing anything about it. And then one day, we look around, and they're gone. And somebody says, "I wonder what happened to so and so." And we shrug our shoulders, and shake our head, and we say, "I don't know".

Why don't we know? And I'm talking to myself as much as anyone else here, but *why don't we know?*

"...take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin...."

You know, one of my hopes for this church, is that we will become a church where it is very difficult for people to drift away - because every time it starts to happen, 50 people come after them, in love, and they either come right back - or they run for their lives with a herd of people in hot pursuit - people unwilling to just sit and watch a brother or sister drift off into oblivion. Now, that's not who we are yet. But the day is coming when that **WILL BE** who we are. And when that day comes, it will be a good day, a *very* good day.

Finally, I want you to see not only that the warnings are real, and the connection between unbelief and disobedience, and the necessity of the church, but also *the hope of the coming rest*. Now there's a ton of stuff here, and I'm going to be *unsatisfactorily brief* on this, but here goes:

Way back in the beginning, after God finished his work of creation - described in terms of six days - he then, on the "seventh" day, *rests* from his creative work. Now this doesn't mean that God put his feet up and stopped being God. But it did mean that he stopped his creative work and simply carried on with his providential and overseeing work. And the interesting thing that many commentators have noted is that the seventh day is the only one which is not concluded with the phrase "and it was morning and evening, the seventh day".

Many of these same commentators have taken the position that this was a deliberate omission because, in fact, we are meant to understand from this that the whole Garden of Eden situation - before the entrance of sin - was lived out in the context of the *rest* of God. In other words, this is what paradise is all about - entering into and enjoying the *rest* of God, and enjoying it *with God*, as Adam and Eve did. Now, again, this "rest" did not mean inactivity, but it *did* mean freedom from meaningless toil and trouble and hardship.

And then sin entered the picture, humanity became a fallen race, and the whole creation was affected - and the "rest" was rudely interrupted. And this notion of "rest" is one among many themes that gets picked up through the Old Testament, and which is part of what God's redemption and restoration is all about - restoring, among many other things, the "Sabbath rest" which was once ours, but which was lost.

And so God's bringing Israel to a promised land was an earthly, temporary installment of that rest that was to be fully restored one day. The promised land was a type - a figure, a symbol that pointed ahead to a more substantial reality that God would accomplish through his coming Messiah. This is the point that the writer of Hebrews picks up on when he says out that this was certainly *David's* understanding since he wrote about the possibility of entering God's rest *long after the days of Joshua and Moses*. This is the point that is further made by the writer of Hebrews in chapter 11, verses 13-16 when he says that Abel and Abraham and Moses - and all these wonderful people in the OT died *without* receiving the things promised because they knew that the fullness of it was *still in front of them*. They knew there was a better country, a heavenly country, that God had prepared for them. A place of hope. A place of rest.

And so the writer of Hebrews wants those who are being tempted to wander away to see that the only hope of obtaining that full and final rest is *in and through Jesus*. "There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" - he says, "...let us therefore *strive to enter that rest*, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience...."

Friends, that's what *this day* is about. This *Sabbath* day. This day of the Lord. It is this fixture, this *rhythm* in our life, this time where we come together to celebrate the goodness of God, in the company of his people. It's not a day about do's and don'ts. It's not a day about what we *must* do, it's a day about what we *can* do. It's about this opportunity we have to live this day, this moment, in a way which is different, which reminds us all of what we have to look forward to, of what we are heading toward, of the "sabbath rest" that is heaven, and that has been secured for us by Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, you who are weary of struggling with sin, weary of this world, weary of a body that no longer does what it used to do, who *long* to be delivered – there is a day coming, a day when you will know fully what you have only *tasted* here, the refreshing, satisfying, thirst-quenching *rest* of God.