

Faithful Through Obedience

TIME: About A.D. 67 PLACE: Unknown

Hebrews 3:12-19

¹² See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. ¹⁴ We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end. ¹⁵ As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion." ¹⁶ Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? ¹⁷ And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? ¹⁹ So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.

Hebrews 4:1,2

¹ Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. ² For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed.

Hebrews 4:9-13

⁹ There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; ¹⁰ for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. ¹¹ Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.

¹² For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. ¹³ Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Lesson Aims

- To show that disciples of Jesus are called to be obedient and faithful to the end.
- To emphasize that obedience to Christ is essential to faithful discipleship.
- To show the students that in order to be a faithful disciple of Jesus, one must be prepared to obey Him.

Introduction

A man was sleeping one night in his cabin when suddenly his room filled with light, and God appeared. The Lord told the man he had work for him to do, and showed him a large rock in front of his cabin. The Lord explained that the man was to push against the rock with all His might.

So, this the man did, day after day. For many years he toiled from sun up to sun down, his shoulders set squarely against the cold, massive surface of the unmoving rock, pushing with all of his might. Each night the man returned to his cabin sore and worn out, feeling that his whole day had been spent in vain.

Since the man was showing discouragement, the adversary (Satan) decided to enter the picture by placing thoughts into the weary mind: "You have been pushing against that rock for a long time, and it hasn't moved."

Thus, he gave the man the impression that the task was impossible and that he was a failure. These thoughts discouraged and disheartened the man. Satan said, "Why kill yourself over this? Just put in your time, giving just the minimum effort: and that will be good enough."

That's what the weary man planned to do, but decided to make it a Matter of Prayer and to take his troubled thoughts to the Lord. "Lord," he said, "I have labored long and hard in your service, putting all my strength to do that which you have asked. Yet, after all this time, I have not even budged that rock by half a millimeter. What is wrong? Why am I failing?" The Lord responded compassionately, "My friend, when I asked you to serve Me and you accepted, I told you that your task was to push against the rock with all of your strength, which you have done. Never once did I mention to you that I expected you to move it. Your task was to push. And now you come to Me with your strength spent, thinking that you have failed. But, is that really so?"

"Look at yourself. Your arms are strong and muscled, your back sinewy and brown; your hands are callused from constant pressure, your legs have become massive and hard. Through opposition you have grown much, and your abilities now surpass that which you used to have.

"True, you haven't moved the rock. But your calling was to be obedient and to push and to exercise your faith and trust in My wisdom. That you have done. Now I, my friend, will move the rock."

At times, when we hear a word from God, we tend to use our own intellect to decipher what He wants, when actually God wants is just a simple obedience and faith in Him. By all means, exercise the faith that moves mountains, but know that it is still God who moves the mountains.

Lesson Background

The previous two lessons presented some facts that are fundamental to the Christian faith. God has spoken to humanity—first to "the fathers" through the prophets, and now "in these last days" through His Son. The Son is one with the Father, "being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person: (Hebrews 1:1-3). That makes the message that He brings unique.

Another vital point is that the Son is superior to the angels. Yet He humbled Himself, taking on flesh, that He might through His suffering and death destroy the devil (2:14). Finally, He stands in the presence of God as our great high priest to make reconciliation for our sins (2:17).

If all these things are true—and they are—so what? There is no escape for us if we neglect the great salvation He offers (2:3). Unbelief lies at the root of all sin. Since Eden, when Satan persuaded Eve to forsake trust in the goodness of God and the sufficiency of His provision, man has turned away from the Lord. Today's lesson urges the people to defend themselves against the sin of unbelief. Unconcealed unbelief and the casual, non-committed kind of "practical unbelief" (have it your way) are rampant. We, as disciples of Christ, have a simple call to Be Faithful: Obey (I Samuel 15:22-23)! Those who have been regenerated by God's grace through faith are now to live each day by that same faith.

The Necessity Of Faithfulness

Don't Harden Hearts (3:12-19)

The writer of Hebrews warns brethren, Christians, by the examples of Israel's failures in the wilderness. They were brought out of Egypt with the fullest assurance of blessing, prosperity, and eternal rest. By their sin and unbelief they came short of the promised blessings, fell in the wilderness, and were cut off from God. The writer states plainly that Christians, the born again or saved men can also return to an evil heart of unbelief, depart from the living God, be hardened by deceitfulness of sin, be cut off by God, and be finally lost. (v. 12-14)

The phrase "an evil heart of unbelief" (vs. 12) means that a lack of faith is the defining characteristic of a sinful heart. We tend to think of a lack of faith as a liability, but not necessarily as a fault and certainly not as a sin. In truth, though, unbelief is a slap in God's face. By failing to trust in God, we are turning away from a relationship with Him. We are saying that fellowship with Him is not good enough and that his word is not reliable. What could be more wicked than that? Christ lets us know that with faith only the size of a mustard seed, we can move mountains and nothing shall be impossible unto us (Matt. 17:20).

1. What does a "unbelieving heart" (Heb. 3:12) mean?

Through its deceitfulness sin promises so much but delivers only disaster. Christian fellowship is vital in helping avoid this snare (Heb. 10:25). Many believers fail to realize that being faithful requires exhorting one another daily. It has been said that the Christian Army is the only Army that kills off its wounded. It is so easy to be judgmental and look down upon those who don't meet the mark or are lacking somewhat in their efforts. When we react in this manner towards our brethren and sisters in Christ we are deceived. Through this sin of unrighteousness, we inflict additional wounds, bite and devour one another.

In addition, our hearts become hardened because we allow Satan to cause us to think more of ourselves than we ought. Too many feel that the only way to be exalted is at the downfall of others.

But when we are faithful as God is faithful we exhort others when they are tempted (I Cor. 10:13) and undergoing persecution (I Pet. 4:12, 13; Isa. 41:10); sanctifying afflictions (Heb. 12:4-12); directing in difficulties (II Chron. 32:22; Psa. 32:8); enabling to persevere (Jer. 32:40), and bringing to glory (I John 2:25).

2. In what way is sin deceitful (v. 13) in its operations?

The rest that awaited Israel was the Promised Land, which was a type of the eternal spiritual kingdom that awaits God's redeemed people. Just as the unbelief and rebellion of the Israelites caused them to never know the peace and contented joy of Canaan, so the renunciation or "abandonment" of faith by professing believers would keep them from the enjoyment of God's eternal fellowship. Their apostasy or "falling away" from Christ would demonstrate that they never truly knew Him (I Tim. 4:1).

Believers must be ever mindful not to fall short. God has given us through Christ a far better race to run than that we find in the athletic races of the world. In the athletic races of the world no matter how many endure to the end, if they don't finish first, second, or third there is no crowning glory. In God's race, though we be hated and persecuted, everyone that endures until the end is crowned with glory (Matt. 10:22).

3. What was the "rest" (4:1) that awaited the nation of Israel in Moses' day?

Promise of Rest (Hebrews 4:9-11)

Assuming that a person believes that God exists, we can start by suggesting that not all beliefs and viewpoints are pleasing to God. For example, virtually all would agree that God disapproves of child abuse. The reason that most would agree with this is because of what God has "written in their hearts" (Romans 2:15).

If a belief that child abuse is pleasing to God is wrong, then this opens the door to the possibility that other beliefs are wrong and displeasing to God as well. When someone's viewpoint of "what God is like" is not consistent with another person's viewpoint, then someone must be wrong. Pointing out these logical problems can plant seeds for future conversations. Daily Bible reading and study will help us resist false beliefs.

4. Since we live among people who believe all sorts of things, how can we communicate that it is only certain beliefs that allow us to "enter into his rest"? How do you make sure that you don't fall into false beliefs or unbelief in this regard?

The rest mentioned here is, of course, Heaven. Interestingly, the Greek word translated rest actually means "Sabbath rest." This idea looks back to creation, when God, after six days of creative activity, rested on the seventh day (Genesis 2:1-3). The epistle to the Hebrews presents a very rich development of the idea of spiritual rest. We tend to view rest simply as taking a break from work, but the rest that God has for His people is much more than that.

Believers have already begun to enjoy a taste of God's rest, and we celebrate that every time we worship on the Lord's Day. We are no longer vainly seeking God's favor through our own works but are resting in the fact that we are clothed in Christ's righteousness.

5. What does the believer's spiritual rest refer to?

It looks forward to the time when we rest from our earthly works (Rev. 14:13). This does not mean, however, that we are to look forward to our Heavenly rest as a place where we will do nothing. The Scriptures give us only a few hints of what Heaven will be like, but we certainly have reason to believe that we will be active there.

Seeing what is at stake, there is obviously nothing more important to a professing believer than remaining faithful to Christ (v. 11). Again, there is no thought here of working to earn our salvation. However, with the world, the flesh, and the devil being strong foes, it is necessary to strive with all the strength of our God-given grace in order to avoid following the sad precedent of the nation of Israel and falling short of the prize. A genuine faith in Christ will be a steadfast faith. Salvation comes through God's grace (Ephesians 2:8,9). God's Son has done all the work necessary for us to enter Heaven. Yet faith without works is dead faith (James 2:26). So we work to the glory of God to show where our allegiance lies. The readers' Jewish forefathers had fallen in the wilderness because they weren't willing to step out on faith to do the work of entering the promised land as God required. That work of faith would have realized that it was actually God working behind the scenes to defeat the enemies. Their failure is an example of unbelief.

6. In what sense does the believer cease from his works (v. 10)?

The Old Testament Sabbath—the seventh day of the week—was a day to do no regular work. This follows the example

that God set in Genesis 2:2,3 and His command in Exodus 20:8-11. For our own mental, physical, and spiritual well-being, we should seriously consider setting aside one day each week to rest as well.

We should not, however, accept the mistaken notion that Sunday is the "Christian Sabbath." Sunday—the first day of the week—is indeed a special day on the Christian calendar (Luke 24:1; Acts 20:7). It seems to be styled "the Lord's day" in Revelation 1:10. While there are good reasons not to let the normal pursuits of life crowd out our privilege and duty to meet with one another and the Lord on the first day of the week, this is not because it is some kind of Sabbath. The cross of Christ has done away with Sabbath-keeping (Colossians 2:16). However, our need for periodic rest from the normal labors of life remains.

7. How can we as Christians use the Old Testament concept of "Sabbath rest" for our lives today—if at all?

Power of God (Hebrews 4:12, 13)

Sword That Penetrates (v. 12)

The Word of God, as we see in the text, "cuts" us in the sense that it judges us. The Word shows us what we ought to be. When we examine ourselves carefully, we see what we are. A judgment event occurs when God evaluates our actions and motives through His Word.

While this is usually painful, we need to allow the Word of God to continue to judge us. It is important to keep in mind that we are dealing with the Word of the all-knowing Creator of the universe. There is no hiding from Him. There is only room for honest self-evaluation and a reckoning with and in the truth.

The illustration of this power is a comparison with a sword (Ephesians 6:17), specifically a two-edged sword. Such a sword "cuts both ways" and is powerful in all kinds of situations (Proverbs 5:3,4; Revelation 1:16; 2:12). Just as a sharp sword in the hands of a skilled fighter can shatter bones and marrow, so the word may penetrate the inner workings of our spirits.

We may be able to hid our thoughts and intentions from those about us, but we cannot hide them from the Word. The Word not only guides our actions, it also judges whether or not we pay heed to that guidance.

8. What illustrates the power of God's Word?

Sight That Penetrates (v. 13) Whether on the highest mountain, beneath the deepest sea, or behind the thickest wall, we cannot escape God's penetrating vision. This constant surveillance prepares us for the time when we stand before the Heavenly judgment throne. When the Lord returns, He "will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts" (I Corinthians 4:5). Wise is the person who lives life as if God were watching every move—which He is.

Conclusion Of all people, Christians must agree with the idea that things are not always as they seem to be. We cannot always gauge the truth by appearances. The Christian will often face dark circumstances in life when he will detect very little evidence that he is on the winning side of history. At such times his only hope is to trust with unwavering faith in the promises and goodness of God.

When everything seems to go wrong ... just P.U.S.H.! When the job gets you down ... just P.U.S.H.! When people don't react the way you think they should ... just P.U.S.H.! When your money is "gone: and the bills are due ... just P.U.S.H.! When people just don't understand you ... just P.U.S.H.! P = Pray U = Until S = Something H = Happens

Prayer

Help us, Father, to learn how to please You through obeying You. Guide us as we seek to find Your will for us, and then give us the strength, knowledge, will, and stamina to serve You in ways that will be pleasing to You. Help us avoid distractions that can keep us from the obedience that You require. Father increase our faith and help our unbelief. Because of Jesus and in His name, amen.

Thought to Remember

"Ask for the old paths, . . . and walk therein" (Jeremiah 6:16).