

The Book of Hebrews

Part 8: Being Faithful to the Voice (Heb. 3:16 – 4:3)

I. Overcoming a “Bad Report”

This heavenly letter is calling us to pay attention and focus in on the “voice of the Lord”—the message of our redemption. Through the work of our High Priest, we have been redeemed as the beloved sons and daughters of God. In the last session, we then came across this warning:

7 Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, “Today if you hear His voice, 8 do not harden your hearts as when they provoked me, as in the day of trial in the wilderness, 9 where your fathers tried Me by testing Me, and saw my works for forty years. 10 Therefore I was angry with this generation, and said, “They always go astray in their heart, and they did not know my ways”; 11 as I swore in my wrath, “They shall not enter my rest.”

(Hebrews 3:7-11)

The writer is making reference to an historical incident here, giving a warning to the readers about history repeating itself. This is a heavy undertone to the entire letter. To understand this, we have to look at the story behind these words.

Almost 1,500 years prior, Moses had led the Hebrew people to the borders of Canaan, the land promised to their forefather Abraham. Through Moses, God redeemed Abraham’s multiplied descendants from their slavery in Egypt and offered them this promised gift of “*a land flowing with milk and honey.*”

When the Israelites approached the land, twelve spies were sent out to view it. They returned with a unanimous report on the amazing and plentiful state of the land. Unfortunately, things broke down from there as only two spies believed they could defeat the people who were occupying the land. The other spies all looked at the occupants and felt overwhelmed by their strength and size. As a result, the scriptures tell us they gave the rest of Israel “*a bad report.*”

31 But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us." 32 So they gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone, in spying it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great size.

33 "There also we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim); and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."

(Numbers 13:31-33)

The people are swallowed up by their fear and end up not being able to enter this land of abundance. Instead, they end up wandering for forty years until this entire generation of fear and unbelief dies in the wilderness.

These people—the original Hebrews—were being offered their own kind of “gospel.” This was incredibly good news being presented to them. A blessed and fruitful territory would be given to them and their children freely. All they needed to do was just take God at his word and walk into the land. God promised he would overcome every enemy standing in their way.

Unfortunately, they saw this news as “too good to be true” and allowed fear to fill their hearts, and so rejected the promise. The reason for this is that they were focused on the wrong things. Their attention was on the size of their enemies and their own weaknesses.

The loss of a fruitful inheritance all came down to an issue of **perception**:

“We became as grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight.”

They did not see themselves as the redeemed children of Yahweh. They saw themselves as weak creatures of the earth that could be trampled upon. They saw themselves the way the enemy saw them, and that led to them rejecting the promise.

The writer of Hebrews is reminding them of this story for two reasons. The first is the most important reason that speaks across the ages even to us today:

The message from God—his voice to these first Hebrews—was this: *I have freely given you this fruitful Promised Land. No giant that seems to occupy it can stand in your way.*

This is the voice of our Father to us today: *I have freely given you perfect righteousness. You are free from sin, condemnation, and the power of darkness. You are my redeemed son and daughter. There is no giant of sin—whether addiction, lust, anger, shame, etc.—nothing can stand in your way as you trust my voice, and focus on my perspective.*

This is behind the writer’s words in the letter to the Hebrews. He was telling them to stop looking at any darkness or weakness in their life, and instead start believing in the good news of being a perfect child of God.

The words of the ancient Hebrews—*“I’m just a grasshopper”*—is equivalent to someone today who has “crossed over” in Christ proclaiming—*“I’m just a sinner!”*

The gospel tells us: *No! You are an overcomer now who is one with Christ... You are set free, healed, and whole in Jesus.*

This is the voice of God we’re called to pay much closer attention to!

II. The Forty-Year Window

The writer of Hebrews is reminding them of this story for a second reason. This gets back to the undertone of the letter where there's a warning about the consequences that come when we yield to a wrong perception and reject the good news of grace.

16 For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? 17 And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? 18 And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? 19 So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.

(Hebrews 3:16-19)

In one sense, the writer is giving a general warning here about the results of allowing fear and unbelief to hold a place in your heart. But he is also referencing a forty-year window that would be a signal to the Hebrew people who were approaching forty years of having rejected the good news of Jesus.

This letter was most likely written in the 60s AD. Jesus Christ had begun his ministry of redemption around 30 AD. The majority of Israel, including the religious leaders who represented the nation much like the ten spies, had rejected Christ.

Instead of accepting his sacrifice, they continued to pursue righteousness and holiness through the law. They continued their animal sacrifices and the entire temple system. The writer of Hebrews calls this "dead works" and compares animal sacrifices to trampling on the precious blood of Jesus.

The nation was now approaching 40 years since that time. There were increasing conflicts with Rome. False messiahs and charismatic leaders were emerging who called the people to fight Rome and to bring the Kingdom of God to earth through Israel.

The Roman Empire was trying to quench the rebellion and allow the people to continue to living in land. However, the Jews mostly rejected these offers. They believed Yahweh would deliver them from the pagan empire surrounding them, and so more and more Jews decided to fight.

Meanwhile, this letter was essentially telling them to stop fighting altogether. Instead, they were to come into a place of rest in the heart by accepting the greater sacrifice of Jesus—and to embrace a Kingdom of love that comes by the Spirit and not through physical warfare (see John 18:36).

1 Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it. 2 For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in

those who heard. 3 For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said, “As I swore in My wrath, they shall not enter My rest...”
(Hebrews 4:1-3)

The original Hebrew people of Moses’s day feared the giants of the land. The writer to this generation of Hebrews is saying the only thing you should fear in this world is not experiencing the peace and joy of being a beloved son or daughter of God. Our only worry should be if we’re worried!

In all of this, the writer is giving a clear warning about history repeating itself. While self-righteous followers of the Torah were declaring war against the evil system and promising a political and military victory, the letter is telling them they’re tragically wrong. Their rejection of Jesus’s grace and Kingdom was going to lead to the destruction of the entire generation.

Indeed, this is what happened in 70 AD—exactly 40 years after Jesus began his ministry.

- *Note: While Jesus’s ministry began around 30 AD, his crucifixion most likely occurred on the Passover of 33 AD. Incredibly, the Passover of 73 AD is considered the real end of this period of conflict. Exactly 40 years to the day, Rome defeated the last Jewish stronghold in the Battle of Masada.*

This is verifiable history that came *after* the book of Hebrews was written. This shows the prophetic power and the weighty significance of this letter. There was yet another generation who perished because of their resistance to the invitation of grace.

Prophetic Note: “Red Heifers”

As noted in the first session, Hebrews carries a timeless message that still speaks today. Since the beginning of this study, news has broken out over the world regarding the first animal sacrifice and purification ceremony in Israel since 70 AD! As of the time of this writing, plans are being made to sacrifice red heifers as the first stage of what is believed by some to be the restoration of the temple.

In light of everything we read in Hebrews, this holds horrific implications for Israel. In fact, in the events of October 7, 2023, when Israel was attacked by Hamas, there was a direct connection to these red heifers. The terrorists had publicly communicated their offense over these animals and a reason for their attack.

Let’s be reminded that God is not punishing Israel by allowing terrorists to come in. God was not directly punishing Israel with Rome either; neither was it his intention for the first Hebrews to experience death in the wilderness. These things break his heart, which is why Jesus was weeping over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44). Animal sacrifices are a rejection of God’s covering grace, allowing the enemy more room to operate. (This means if some kind of temple does come into operation, it would not be long before forces of darkness are drawn to Israel in a way we haven’t seen in thousands of years.)

III. Awakening the Word with Faith

The timing of these things during a study on Hebrews should wake us up even more to the significance of our own perceptions and focus. In light of that, the fourth chapter opens with a revolutionary statement. In it, we find the word “faith” being used for the first time:

“The word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard...”

God had given a free promise to every person in Israel. Apart from their own worthiness or ability, God was promising a blessing of a long and fruitful life in Canaan. The problem was that this “word” did not “profit” them or come into fruition because they didn’t unite the message with “faith.”

This is a core message of the book. We are not just called to hear the Good News, but to give our attention to it and have *faith* in it.

In the language this letter was written, the word for “faith” being used is *pistis*. It was a simple term for “confidence,” but it was used a lot in the context of marriages and friendships. *Pistis* could also be translated as “faithfulness” or “an oath of fidelity.”

This word is more than just mentally agreeing with a message by thinking it’s true. It speaks of being committed to the message. For example, when opposing voices come and heap condemnation on us or causing us to focus on the enemy or on our weaknesses—*pistis* is our fidelity—our commitment—to return to God’s perspective.

In this sense, *pistis* is not always a feeling (though it can lead to very positive feelings), just as fidelity in marriage is not tied to our feelings (though it should lead to positive feelings as well). A person is faithful to their spouse whether they feel like it or not. In fact, fidelity shines bright when a person stays committed even when they’re feelings are telling them not to.

This letter is saying that the Hebrews didn’t experience blessing and breakthrough because they didn’t take the message (the voice ... the promise) of God and “unite” it with *pistis*. The word “unite” means to **mingle together**. They didn’t take the message and add faithfulness to it. They didn’t walk it out by going into the land despite their feelings of fear.

In this sense, the message or voice of God in our lives is like a seed that lies dormant until the water of faith activates it. When you mingle a seed with water, something miraculous happens apart from your efforts. Life ignites when a seed meets water.

This is what happens when we add confidence and faithfulness to the Word of God. When we continue to hold our confession of righteousness no matter what; when we continue to celebrate our freedom from sin despite what we’re feeling—fruitfulness comes and we experience victory over giants that appears to stand in our way.

The book of Hebrews is saying that God is speaking a message of identity, freedom, and love over us. We are called to take that message and mingle it with faithfulness.

On the other hand, if we choose to believe in a “bad report” about ourselves and God, and live according to it, we will experience defeat. As the writer says, it will not “profit” us with life and abundance.

IV. Falling Away from Grace

The word “profit” leads to another powerful point being made in the letter. To understand this, we have to look at another scripture where this term appears:

1 It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. 2 Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit (*profit*) to you. 3 And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. 4 You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. (Galatians 5:1-4)

The book of Galatians is very similar to Hebrews. It’s warning people about the pitfalls of “falling from grace.” This is what the writer of Hebrews warned about in the last chapter:

12 Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. (Hebrews 3:12)

Put together with Galatians, we see how “falling away” happens when a person falls from an awareness and a trust in God’s love and grace over their life.

This confirms further what we discovered in the last session—an “*evil, unbelieving heart*” is one that stays under condemnation and a false identity. It’s a heart that listens to the bad report, believing “*I am just a little grasshopper.*”

Paul addresses the issue of “falling away” in another letter of his:

1 But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons... (1 Timothy 4:1)

Like the letter to the Hebrews, Paul is talking about where our “attention” is. He warns about paying attention to demonically inspired teachings (“doctrines”). Look at the examples he then gives for these teachings:

3 Men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth.

(1 Timothy 4:3)

Demonic doctrines are legalistic teachings! The forbidding of marriage and fasting/dietary restrictions invaded the church early on, causing people to conclude that becoming a holy and beloved child of God involves your own spiritual work. Ironically, Christians today will warn others about all kinds of “demonic” issues and yet so many miss the main warning of the New Testament—which was legalism!

As this book goes on, we will continue to see the radical call to embrace the message of grace and God’s love with a radical fidelity and faithful confidence!

“The Great Falling Away”

In light of the above, we can see how Paul’s warning about the “falling away” already happened in the early church. Religious systems quickly emerged, shrouding the church in a revised Old Covenant system with a new priesthood.

In similar passages, Paul warns about people who want their ears tickled (2 Timothy 4:3). In this context we see people actually want their ears “tickled” with legalism, fear, and punishment. There is something satisfying to the human drive for self-atonement. Guilt-driven teachings feed on this inner need to feel holy, loved, and accepted. **But this is infidelity to the message of grace!**

Note: Many believe *2 Thessalonians 2* suggests another “falling away” will occur the full appearing of Christ; however, the passage is filled with great mystery and many scholars believe this is speaking to the “falling away” that occurred during the events surrounding 70 AD.

Nonetheless, others believe it will be fulfilled a second time in the context of a global antichrist figure (see 1 John 2:18). Even if this true, the main warning remains the same. We are to stay true to the radical grace and goodness of God and not sucked into legalistic systems.

Follow-up Encounter:

Prepare to take communion. Ask God what “fidelity” to his Word looks like in your life. First, meditate on what his Voice of grace and truth is speaking over you. Then ask what it looks like to walk in faithfulness to that Word... Receive the bread and the cup—his grace to walk this out. Share with others (or write down) what came to your heart during this time of reflection.