

Hebrews 3:7-4:13 Standing Firm On Our Principles

Introduction

One of the hardest things to accomplish in life is to maintain consistently the convictions we profess. The pressure upon us in a whole variety of situations can be huge and incredibly difficult to resist in our own strength. It is only with the aid of the Holy Spirit that we can stand firm resisting all manner of temptations to compromise our principles; Paul sought to encourage the struggling Christians in Corinth with these words: *No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it* (I Corinthians 10:13). The problem for us as Christians is that too often when we think of temptations we often think of things like the stealing of sweets or toys by children or sexual / relationship issues for adults, but what our author has in mind is so much broader than that. It includes trusting God that His work will be accomplished by doing it His way rather than by cutting corners or breaching ethical boundaries. There are churches that have gained significant funds from lottery sources or through omitting to mention the Christian nature of their work to gain grant funding; by contrast others who were open and honest about how funds were to be used lost out, humanly speaking, by stating clearly the purpose of their work. There are plenty of challenges many of us have faced in the workplace where we have had to be careful about how we spoke to customers or potential clients because of pressure from others to be less than transparently truthful about our position. As our culture turns increasingly away from Christian values we must understand that it will get harder and harder to keep a foothold in the public square. Although at present it is not an issue in most occupations, I think it likely that over the next generation or two the cost of being a faithful disciple of Jesus will be increasingly high, but our calling remains unchanged. Moses and the Israelites were called by God to leave Egypt and form a nation of people covenanted to God, but because of a failure to trust God properly (Numbers 13-14), it cost them an extra forty years of waiting to see the promise fulfilled. Christians too need to be careful how we live our lives individually and collectively, because the implications are that we too may see God's blessings delayed if we fail to honour Him in the way that we should go.

1. God's voice from the past (Hebrews 3:7-11)

(a) The dangers of apostasy (Hebrews 3:7-8a) *So, as the Holy Spirit says: 'Today, if you hear His voice, ⁸do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion...* The Jewish followers of Jesus to whom this letter was written had been looking seriously at returning to their Jewish roots to avoid the pain and suffering of serious persecution that had been wearing them down. Judaism was a legal religion in the Roman Empire and although there was persecution from time to time it was not significant at this particular time. However, the author wants to remind them that the leaders of the Jewish faith now in the first century AD in their response to Jesus, like their ancestors in the time of Moses had gone astray in failing to honour God in their daily lives. The ingratitude of Israel in the desert was amazing. The deliverance from Egypt and their formation as a nation from a crushed and subdued enslaved people could only be described as miraculous. But their ingratitude in the four decades that followed is truly astonishing. But the challenge of our author to his first readers and to us is this: how grateful to God am I for my blessings? Do I appreciate all the good things I have enjoyed from God? In our instant culture in which the

present experience is privileged it is so easy to put the past and its blessings behind us and focus primarily on the present time and its difficulties. For some other people there may be a temptation to live in the past with rose-tinted spectacles, remembering all the good things and forgetting their struggles and difficulties that God brought them through. In every age and era we need to keep asking ourselves what are the issues that could hinder my walk with God? For some people it is the temptation to take promotions at work that may bring in more money, but it may equally mean inadequate time for their families; or it may mean they are less free to attend worship services at church on a Sunday or in some other way to the overall detriment of their lives. Our serious temptations as Christians are rarely to do something that is seriously wrong, but much more often they are concerned with priorities and choices that may or may not help us and others around us on our journey of faith. Is there an issue you need to address today? The Bible repeatedly urges us to guard our hearts and our minds from ungodly attitudes that would direct our pathway in inappropriate directions. Paul's words in Romans 12:1-2 remind us of how we ought to be living: *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will.*

(b) **The warning from Scripture** (Hebrews 3:7-11) *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 wilderness, ⁹ where your ancestors tested and tried Me, though for forty years they saw what I did. ¹⁰ That is why I was angry with that generation; 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."' (Hebrews 3:7-11) These words are based on Psalm 95:7b-11, a Psalm whose earlier words are often quoted in church services as a call to worship. The Psalm in its context is an invitation to enter the presence of God and to honour Him and give Him His due place in our lives. Worship is of course so much more than merely singing or other activities in church services it is giving God His rightful place in our lives. We can say or sing all the right words and phrases to one another when we have been Christians for some time, but our hearts can be cool towards the Lord. Therefore, there is a clue here that serves as a pointer for us to look into our hearts when we are reflecting on how we are getting on with the Lord. How enthusiastically do I seize opportunities to gather with His people for worship and fellowship? In terms of the things I take pleasure in or get excited about is the Lord and His work my chief joy? There can be no greater joy than hearing of someone coming to faith in Jesus? There is also great joy in hearing someone's story of getting back on track with God? Do these things excite me? Do they motivate me to pray for people who need Jesus on a regular basis? Do they help me to find time in my schedule to carve out a little time to spend with someone who doesn't yet know Jesus with a view to sharing my faith with them in a natural and appropriate way? A person who is truly giving God His place will be unlikely to need the warning cited here in the second half of Psalm 95. It is when our hearts are more focused on other things that the warning needs to be heeded. The positive call of Psalm 95 declares: *Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. ² Let us come before Him with thanksgiving and extol Him with music and song. ³ For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods. ⁴ In His hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to Him. ⁵ The sea is His, for He made it, and His hands formed the dry land. ⁶ Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; ⁷ for He is our God and we are the people of His pasture, the flock under His care.* What do I get most excited about thinking about the future?*

What are my most significant hopes for the next steps in my life? Where does God figure in my thinking?

For these Italian believers so discouraged and having lost their focus on what was most important, they needed to be reminded forcefully of what happened to these Old Testament believers who had been too focused on their material comfort rather than on their walk with the Lord. Hebrews 3:10-11, citing the last two verses of Psalm 95 remind us and them of the consequences of failing to keep our right focus on the Lord. . ¹⁰*That is why I was angry with that generation; 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."*(Hebrews 3:10-11). The serious challenge here is to grasp that by failing to give God His place in our lives we may miss out entirely on blessings that might otherwise have been our experience. This is a most solemn point on which we can reflect when seriously tempted to water down our Christian commitment or to fail to honour Him as we ought to do.

2. **God's voice in the present** (Hebrews 3:12-19)

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.

(a)**Hearing God's Voice** *So, as the Holy Spirit says: 'Today, if you hear His voice... (3:7); ¹⁵ As has just been said: 'Today, if you hear His voice... (3:15); 'Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts... (4:7);* Christians are incredible generous people in many respects; the many of acts of kindness which are carried out week by week by people in this congregation is a testament to that fact; Yet the shocking fact is that there are people today living in our country who once walked with the Lord and served in His Church but who today are living far from Him. How did they get into that place? Some years ago, prior to coming to this church, I was asked to take the funeral of a lady from a residential home whom I had never met. I agreed to conduct the service and was given the name of a relative who was incredibly helpful in providing the information I needed to prepare for that service. Early in our conversations he told me that he didn't believe in God, but assured me that there would be plenty of other people who might be present who would appreciate and take comfort from a Christian funeral service. What shook me up so much was the revelation that he shared on one occasion that he used to be a Christian minister here in our country. How did he get from where he was to his current way of thinking? I did later get a fuller picture of what had happened. It did reinforce the warning of the words here and especially Paul's words in I Corinthians 10:1-12, which is an extended warning by Paul along the lines of these words here. Note especially the last verse of this passage: *For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. ² They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. ³ They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴ and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. ⁵ Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. ⁶ Now these things occurred as examples to*

keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.⁷ Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: 'The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.'⁸ We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did – and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died.⁹ We should not test Christ, as some of them did – and were killed by snakes.¹⁰ And do not grumble, as some of them did – and were killed by the destroying angel.¹¹ These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.¹² **So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!** We sometimes say 'But for the grace of God go I' when we hear of what has happened in someone else's life, but it may truly be the case if we take our eyes off the Lord and cease listening to His voice. The story of the young Samuel in I Samuel 3 hearing God's voice when the priestly officials no longer were able to do so is a frightening scenario of what can happen when men and women who claim to be believers fail to keep their eyes fixed on the Lord and resolving to stand firm on biblical principles for their lives.

(b) **Believing God's message** There is a gap between our heads and our hearts which in physical terms is small, but in spiritual terms can be a vast chasm. We say we believe in God but do the implications of that conviction shape our attitudes, our values and our priorities? James' letter to young churches in the Roman world makes this point very forcefully. James 2:18-20 states: *But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.*¹⁹ **You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.** The Israelites in the Desert could all recite the right theology of the Jewish faith, but the choices they made on too many occasions revealed that there was something seriously missing in their lives. The root issue our author here in Hebrews believes was unbelief that God meant what He said and intends to do what He has promised. If we are honest, even as genuine believers we have our times of doubt and our fears. This side of heaven we will never get things completely right. However, what is truly important is that we learn to take God at His word and trust Him with our lives for both the present and the future. When we are tempted to fudge on something clearly stated in Scripture and seek to find hermeneutic schemes to evade the force of them for our lives we are skating in thin ice, spiritually-speaking! We must listen for His voice and then believe His message.

(c) **Obeying God's truth** There is of course an obvious third step. We having genuinely discerned what God might be saying to us in a particular context and determined to accept what the Scriptures say, then need to ask how might I shape my life in accordance with this truth? We are called to trust and obey what we have heard. Hebrews 3:18 reminds us of what happened to the Israelites long ago. *And to whom did God swear that they would never enter His rest if not to those who disobeyed?* This is incredibly practical for us as well as for these first readers of this letter/ What teaching of Scripture am I struggling to put into practice just now? Or someone might need to ask an even more searching question: What passages of Scripture am I refusing to conform my life to at the present time? These are real and genuine issues that can be a cause of real heart-searching for us. How we respond to that could influence our lives for years to come. I have not forgotten my parents on a number of occasions talking about the biggest test for them as a newly-wed couple. They had extremely limited finances and were sorely tempted not to tithe to God's work, simply because they were struggling even to pay for basic necessities of life. However, they determined to put God first and trust Him for the future. It was for them a transformative moment. What has been the equivalent moment for you? Or moments? Or is there someone here facing a big challenge over which the Lord is providing an opportunity to trust Him with your future? All of us will experience a few of these testing times in our lives. They are formative in shaping our values and principles sometimes for years to come. Remember

God's promise in I Samuel 2:30: *But now the Lord declares...Those who honour Me I will honour, but those who despise Me will be disdained.* How is this principle being worked out in your life and mine?

(d) **Sharing God's truth** As a Christian community of faith our calling is to encourage one another to be the best we can be for the Lord. It is very important that when we are known to stand for key convictions as a church that people outside our ranks see us living in the light of what we have declared to be our principles. Hebrews 3:12-13 states: *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.** The word translated 'encourage' was used in secular Greek culture of that day by military leaders to motivate their troops before battles, for example. It is about positive guidance to strengthen a person to stand firm on their principles. There are many ways by which we can put this into practice. Galatians 6:1-2 states: *Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.*² *Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ .* An effective church will be one where its members encourage and support one another as we live for the Lord. Who might you encourage this week to stand firm in their faith? Who might you or I help in some practical way?

3. **God's word for the future** (Hebrews 4:1-13)

(a) **God has taken care of your future** (Hebrews 4:1-11) *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.*³ *Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, 'So I declared on oath in My anger, "They shall never enter My rest." And yet His works have been finished since the creation of the world.*⁴ *For somewhere He has spoken about the seventh day in these words: 'On the seventh day God rested from all His works.'*⁵ *And again in the passage above He says, 'They shall never enter My rest.'*⁶ *Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience,*⁷ *God again set a certain day, calling it 'Today'.* This He did when a long time later He spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted: *'Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.'*⁸ *For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day.*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.* The Israelites in the desert were not convinced that God would take them into the Promised Land; otherwise they would have done things His way. In so doing they forfeited the intended blessings God had provided for them. In time they would gain great blessings under the leadership of Joshua, but God still had even greater blessings reserved for them in the future. The words of Philippians 1:6 summarise so well the teaching of these verses for the obedient child of God. *Being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus;* What He has started in your life personally He will bring to its full completion in His time; what God has planned for this church He will bring to pass in His time –whether building projects or the conversions of people for whom we are praying, and so much more. Do you need to hear this reassurance today? Your future is secure because it is in His hands. Therefore, you and I must stand firm in our faith and trust God to do His work in us and through us.

(b) **God's word is powerful in changing lives** (Hebrews 4:12) *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.* The most dangerous book in the whole world is the Bible. It is a living book that is God-breathed to transform your life and mine. It is a practical book to give us principles to shape our lives in obedience to His revealed will. As we pray and ask God to speak to us from the Bible He will do that, but not always at the time and in the way we were expecting. Yet it is so powerful at times speaking into our lives because the Holy Spirit of God uses His written word to shape and fashion us closer to the likeness of our Lord and Saviour. The question is do you get adequate exposure to His word? Do you daily give a few moments to read and reflect on His word after prayer inviting Him to speak into your life? When we come to church do you pray before the service Lord speak into my life whatever You want to say to me today, through the songs and prayers, the Scripture reading and message or in whatever way You wish to direct my pathway. Paul, in II Timothy 3:16-17, reminds us of the practical usefulness of the Scriptures: *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.* Maybe take a few moments later today to reflect on some examples of how God has shaped your life through His word and then in gratitude to Him, turn this revelation into a prayer so as to return our thanks to Him.

(c) **God is watching us carefully** (Hebrews 4:13) *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.* Why is He watching us carefully? Because He is willing us to succeed in our journeys of faith and our growth in Christ-likeness; In Jesus He has modeled for us how we ought to live and through the empowering of the Holy Spirit has provided the spiritual resources we need to live for Him. However, in case we need an extra incentive to live holy lives we are told in Hebrews 4:13 that: *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.* All of us will one day give an account before Him. We cannot hide anything from Him so we must live in a way that pleases Him. There are many New Testament references that make this kind of reference. I John 3:2-3, for example, states: *Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. **But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as he is.** ³**All who have this hope in Him purify themselves, just as He is pure.*** Do you have this hope and this motivation? I trust so! May God help us to worship and honour Him by living lives pleasing for Him and in standing firm on our principles, for Jesus' sake, Amen.