

Hebrews 3-4: Jesus Our Faithful High Priest

Lord, we come before You and ask that You would be pleased to enlighten us that we might taste of the goodness of Your Word, that we might even understand and better participate in the life of the Spirit and the powers of the age to come. As we taste of these things may we not neglect them or make light of them, but treasure them, that we might be strong. Lord, we know that any strength we have is not our own, but it is a strength that we may have through Christ, who is our great high priest. Lord, You are in heaven and You hear our prayers and our cries. You empathize with us as we cry because You, too, even cried out with loud tears and lamentations and You were heard. Oh Lord, may we have the confidence that whatever prayer we lift up to You will be heard whether we cry or whether we rejoice. Lord, we ask now that whatever our situation in life may be, that we would grow closer to You and be better equipped to serve You by our meditations upon the supremacy of Christ our Lord. In His name we pray. Amen.

In a previous lecture we were meditating on Hebrews 2:5-18, and especially Jesus, our empathetic hero. We saw, among other things, that Jesus is the one who fulfills the true destiny of mankind. We saw from Hebrews two that God has an interest in humanity. God's interest was expressed way back in the beginning, in Genesis one. In Psalm eight we see that God has an interest in humanity in that He is mindful of us because we are just a little lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor. Nothing is not subject to us. We saw, however, that this stirring affirmation about mankind is not perfectly realized. At times it seems as though it is hardly realized at all. In truth, that is our destiny only in Christ. Only in Christ will we taste of that greatness that is supposed to be ours. He is, we said in the last lecture, our hero. We do not see the glory that we aspire to, but we do see Jesus who is crowned with glory and honor. He is the one whom we observe. He shared in our humanity and humiliation, and with Him we come to glory. He defeated our great enemy and adversary, even the devil.

That is where we left off last time. What I would like to do in this lecture is think about, or meditate on, three principles that come from what we learned in the previous lecture that have bearing on Christian theology and life. The first of them is a thought from 2:10 to answer a question many people have. They say, "Now, wait a minute. Hebrews 2:10 says, 'In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.' What does that mean that Jesus was made perfect? I thought Jesus was already perfect. Is Hebrews saying there is something wrong with Jesus or that there is some deficiency that needs to be remedied? That maybe He sinned or maybe He was imperfect?" I would say no to that question. In fact, the word "perfect" in the phrase, "was made perfect through suffering," actually has two meanings in the Bible. The root behind the two meanings is the idea of something going to its end, its goal, and its purpose in life. To go to your goal or purpose can have two meanings. It can relate to your moral nature, which is why it says "make perfect." We think of "making perfect" as making someone to be without sin, but it also refers to being consecrated so that you can fulfill your task—that is to say, being made perfect means going to the end of your work. That is the sense in which it is used here. The Greek word is *teliao* from which we get the words *telas* and *teleology*, the study of the ends of things. That word is used about 25 times in a document called the *Septuagint*, which is a translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew into Greek. That is where much of the vocabulary of the New Testament comes from. In the *Septuagint*, almost half the time, that word *teliao* means to consecrate, specifically to consecrate a priest for service. For example, in Exodus 29:4-9, Moses commands, "You shall consecrate [or perfect, take to its end] Aaron's hands and the hands of his sons." That is to say, they are to consecrate the hands of Aaron and his sons to the task of their high priestly ministry. *Teliao* is used in this way about 10 times. The idea, then, is this: not that there is something wrong with Jesus, but rather that Jesus is consecrated for his high priestly ministry by suffering.

That leads immediately to the next meditation on Hebrews 2:10 and following: the implication for the life of the Christian of the suffering that Christians endure. If it is true that Jesus is consecrated, or made perfect through suffering, and if it is true that Jesus (2:9) had to taste death for us all—if even Jesus who was crowned with glory and honor had to suffer—then how can we dream that we will be free from suffering? I say “we” because this is a word for us as well. Of course, the author is speaking first of all to his audience. “You Hebrews, you would like to escape the suffering that is coming your way, but even Jesus did not do that. Even Jesus, to be fully consecrated for God’s service, had to suffer.” So surely we need to be prepared to face suffering as well, especially since it is made so clear in Hebrews 2:11-13 that we are of the same family as Jesus. We are His brothers, it says in 2:11. It says in 2:13 that we are God’s sons; we are of the same family and Jesus is not ashamed to call us His brothers (2:11,13). He says we are His children. If Jesus is our big brother and our big brother had to suffer, then maybe we should expect to suffer. Most of us tend somewhat to follow in the path of our older brothers and sisters. We resisted, but the truth is, my older brother played Little League baseball and I played Little League baseball. We took many of the same classes and had many of the same teachers; we even went to the same college. That is the way it is with younger brothers and sisters so very often. And so if Jesus our big brother, the head of our family, had to suffer, how can we imagine that we should not? In fact, it says in verses 14 and 15 that He partook of our flesh and blood so that by partaking, He might nullify the one who has the power of death. How? By suffering. But then, by doing that, He set us free from the power of death and that is the point too. You will suffer as Jesus suffered. You will suffer, but Jesus defeated Satan and broke the power and fear of death. Therefore, the fear of death should be broken free too. You should be willing to face this suffering.

The third principle is that Jesus becomes, or Jesus is, our hero. Hero is a title used for Jesus in 2:10: Jesus our hero and trailblazer. That is something I would like to meditate upon a little. I would say that we have lost our sense of the heroic in the west. In philosophy, the death of transcendence means the death of transcendent values. We are, in the words of Bertrand Russell, merely an accidental concoction of atoms. How can an accidental concoction of atoms or a complex arrangement of protein chains possibly have heroism in it? It cannot. This philosophy evaporates even the idea that we can conceive of somebody as heroic. Classical psychology tells us that almost everything anybody does that is grand or great or noble is somehow a result of suppressed desires. The Freudians say that Leonardo da Vinci was so busy with his inventions, painting, and political life because of his suppressed homosexuality. They really have said that. Behaviorism reduces everything to some kind of quest for reward. Mother Theresa was not really altruistic, behaviorists would say. They would say that she did not really care about the people who lived in the slums, the poorest of the poor living in India. She was in it for the sense of wholeness that she received—the sense of gratification and significance. The economists will tell you that almost everything we do has some hope of a reward. In the west, even if you do something for free, you might be thinking that maybe somebody will do something for you in return. That is really why we do everything, they say. There is an element of truth in this and that is why it is so dangerous. Every sacrifice can be explained away by cynicism.

Of course, we still have heroes in the west. They are one-dimensional heroes. We have mighty men throwing footballs, dunking basketballs, throwing fastballs, hitting home runs, and slapping a hockey puck at 100 mph and so forth. Those are our heroes. But do not look too closely because after they are done passing, throwing, or running, they have no more idea how to live than you do. Charles Barkley, a fine basketball player, said one very true thing: “I am not a role model.” He was right. He may be a role model for how to play basketball, but not for how to live life. He spoke for athletics in general those years ago when he said that. We have other heroes, of course, too. We have mighty men at the guitar, singing, acting, and dancing—whatever the case may be. We have our heroes, but they are not people whose lives we want to model. This is heroism in the west today.

I would say that the Bible asserts that heroism is important. In the New Testament alone, the command to imitate someone is given 28 times. Of those 28 times, we are commanded 11 times to imitate God the Father or God the Son, Jesus Christ. We are urged 17 times to imitate, or to model ourselves after, some human, and most often it is the Apostle Paul. The Bible wants us to recapture this idea that there are heroes. There is something to imitate, a vision of excellence and maturity. It captures the imagination and makes us say, “I want to be like that.” There are role models who induce admiration or inspire us somehow.

Sometimes it is easy to think and act as if being a Christian or serving the Lord is a matter of keeping certain rules—doing certain things or not doing certain things. I cannot forget the time a while ago that I was speaking to a group of leaders of a youth group at a fine, wonderful, orthodox reformed church with excellent teaching. I asked this group of 16 to 19 year olds, with a few 22 year olds, “How many of you think of the Christian life as essentially a matter of certain things you do not do that your non-Christian peers do: drinking, smoking, sex, drugs, nasty movies, and pornography? How many of you say that is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think about the Christian life?” Eighty percent of them raised their hands. That is essentially how they view the Christian life. They think being a Christian means not doing what everybody else does. That is sad, because the Christian life is vastly more than what you do not do.

It is very easy to think, “If I do certain things, I will please God and He will be on my side. If I just keep the rules and follow them, then I am living a Christian life.” That is essentially an alternate form of legalism. One form of legalism says you are saved by keeping the law, but the other form says you keep God’s favor by keeping and observing the law. How do you get away from that idea? We can turn to other metaphors for the Christian life. Christian life is not just obedience to the law. It is also bearing fruit, the fruit of the Spirit. Jesus says it is like having a well of water springing up to eternal life. It is like a source just pouring out of you. That is your life; it is like an unstoppable well. It is not a matter of external regulations. It is a matter of God’s life in us. That is one way we can counteract legalism.

Another way to counteract legalism is to have heroes—to have a vision of greatness and grandeur and to let these images of greatness enter our minds. I will tell you, you have to choose wisely. My number one hero in my Christian life became my hero when he was 62 and I was probably 32. He was at that time about 5’10” and maybe 135 pounds. He had suffered from cancer twice. The first time he had cancer, he lost all of his hair so he had just a little bit of hair. He had cancer of the throat once and the chemotherapy made his voice kind of raspy; it would get weak and his pronunciation was a little odd. But he was my hero, not because of what he looked like or sounded like, but because of who he was. He was an extremely intelligent and hard-working man. He was devastatingly witty. I loved that. He was a very, very good listener, but he was also a very good speaker and not many people can combine the two. He was good with people. He did not lecture often. He was on the faculty at the college where I taught and he would speak at faculty meetings about once a month. When he did, everybody listened because we knew that he would have weighed his words and he would be ready to speak on a matter of importance with serious arguments arranged for the right end, not just showing off his knowledge.

I taught a Bible survey course with him with 300 students in it. It was at a Christian college, but you did not have to be a Christian to attend. Most people were Christians, but many of the athletes were not Christians. They spread a rumor among themselves saying, “It is impossible—especially if you are a baseball player—to get Doriani and McMillan to give you a good grade. No matter what has happened, there has never been a baseball player who got a good grade. Even if you earn a good grade you will not get it.” That was the rumor that went around for a couple of years, and so sometimes these fellows

would come by and complain. They would come to me; sometimes I had medium success, and sometimes poor success, in explaining to them why they received their grade. But I noticed when they went to McMillan's office, no matter how grumpy they were going in—stamping down the hallway and knocking on the door with loud, angry voices—no matter how it started, when the door opened later they were always laughing and cheerful. It was almost as if they were saying, “Oh yes, Dr. McMillan, I see why you gave me this terrible grade. It was so nice of you to give me this terrible grade.” Every last person who entered McMillan's office angry, exited as his friend. It was so impressive that, after seeing this happen many times, I asked if he would please leave his door open sometimes so I could see what he was doing, because he was so superb, and do the same thing. I could go on and on about my friend, but he was a model of greatness. And in important ways, I tried to model myself after him. That is the concept of the heroic.

This idea of heroism helps us form our identity as Christians because it addresses a problem that we often neglect in the Christian life: the problem of shame. This is an especially large issue for kids around the ages of 13 to 18. Heroism addresses this problem of shame, which is different from the problem of guilt because we can be ashamed of things for which there is no guilt. For example, if your body lacks dignity and excellence because of blemishes on your face or a squeaky voice—if you do not have beauty—you can be ashamed of that even though there is no sin involved with it. The problem is shame. If we have less money than our friends and our clothes are not as nice as the clothes of our friends, we can be ashamed of that, especially here in the west. Have you ever been ashamed of a car? As a professional after college I once had a car that had a rust hole so big that I lost things through the floor of the car—and that is not a joke. My friends would not allow me to transport their pets in my car. They were afraid they would just fall through. I did not have money for another car, and I was ashamed of mine. There was no sin involved. I had not squandered my money; I just did not have enough money to buy another car. If you do not have skill, you could be ashamed of that. If you cannot fix a simple mechanical problem, or you do not know how to use a computer, or you cannot catch or throw a ball properly, you can be ashamed of that, even though it is not sinful or wrong. Shame comes from a lack of heroism, and the cure for shame is to be great, excellent, and grand. That is the cure.

We have the idea in the western church that the biggest problem is the violation of moral rules. What I am saying is that the issue of heroism has to do with having models of greatness. We are stuck, as Christians, in the realm of rules and morals. We say rightly that Christ solves the problem of our guilt and violation of the moral law. That is absolutely true. And we say that the cure to the problem of guilt, the violation of the law, is gaining righteousness. And we say—absolutely correctly again—that we gain that righteousness through the work of Christ as a gift by faith. But that is not all the Bible says. I want to have you think of a key passage: Romans 3:21. It says simply, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” You may not realize this, but this is actually addressing both problems. “All have sinned.” It is the violation of the moral law which makes us guilty; we need to be righteous. But “All have fallen short” is the problem of not being great. We fall short of the glory of God, as we also see in Hebrews 2:8 and following. The teaching is that we were meant to rule the world for God and if we do not, we have fallen short of glory. We are not supposed to be good only; we are also supposed to be glorious. When we fall short of that, we have the sense of shame.

When we miss or violate God's standards, the result is guilt. This problem needs to be solved by the righteousness of Christ. The second problem is lack of glory. That is solved not by Jesus dying for our sins, but by Jesus giving us glory. Now how do we get glory? The solution to the problem of shame is twofold. The one solution that is already mentioned in this passage is to know that we are accepted, we belong, and we are loved. Even if you are relatively inept in sports, if somebody is willing to say, “I will take him on my team,” that removes the shame of not being picked to be on a team. Someone might be

saying, “Oh no, you do not mean we have to have Joey on our team, do you?” But when somebody else says, “Hey, we want Joey,” that removes Joey’s shame.

Hebrews two tells us that Jesus is not ashamed to call us His brothers. He is calling us into His family. I think it is so excellent and beautiful that Hebrews chooses this family metaphor because it is so easy to be ashamed of our family. Probably everyone here has someone in his or her family of whom they are or were ashamed. There is probably somebody in your family who went to jail, or has bad teeth, bad manners, bad breath, or something. Even if it is not true now, you remember having a little brother or sister who was a complete jerk and hung around and embarrassed you in front of your friends. Jesus says, “I am not ashamed to welcome you into my family. I am not ashamed to give you my world to govern.” We possess greatness first by great family, and second by being remade into the likeness of Jesus and by faithfully governing the world for Him. As we look at Hebrews chapter 11, we see that as the heroes of the faith were faithful, that gave them glory—and us as well. We should look to Jesus as our hero and to fellow Christians as our heroes to get a vision of moral excellence. The Christian life is not just following the rules; it is greatness. It is having a vision that transcends. It is having a concept of ruling the world for God, of accomplishing great things, of being noble and virtuous. We look to fellow humans who are noble in some way and we also look much more to the Lord.

You may say, “How can the Lord be my hero; how can I model Him?” You can have the Lord as your hero and model, not in His being, eternal power, or sacrifice for sins, but in His manner with us and with the world. We can imitate His willingness to accept us, His boldness, His style, and His courage. Jesus had a way of life that is exciting; He never shirked the difficult questions. He was always willing to go to combat against His adversaries. He was willing to fight the strong, but He was also willing to identify with the weak. He had friends who were rich and poor, slave and free, upper class and outcasts, and rich Pharisees and poor beggars. Jesus had greatness. I am meditating on this because I believe this is a portion of the Christian life that is very widely and almost totally ignored in the western church. We are so stuck on the rules. We so often fall into thinking that being a Christian means keeping the rules, not violating the rules, and Jesus saves us from violation of the rules. That is absolutely true and absolutely important—in fact, it is the most important thing—but it is not the only important thing. It is also important to realize that we are created for glory and that Jesus will lead us to glory. We have a need for that. We have a desire for that. There are consequences, such as shame, that come from lacking glory, and there is a cure in Christ.

Hebrews three teaches us some theology and some reflections on Christ. In this passage Hebrews begins to turn more clearly and explicitly to the temptation that is facing the church right at this time. The manner of the author in Hebrews three and four is sometimes very rough. His manner is, at times, very pastoral. From reading this book we can not only learn the content of what the author says, but we can also learn something about methods of dealing with people. The content of chapter three really begins at 2:17 and 18 where the writer sums up what he has been saying about Jesus with these words:

For this reason [Jesus] had to be made like His brothers in every way, in order that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that He might make atonement for the sins of the people.¹⁸ Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted.

That concludes chapter two and then 3:1 continues with, “Therefore, holy brothers who share in this heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.” There is a very pregnant remark in 2:17 where it says that Jesus is a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God. This little statement, “Jesus is a merciful and faithful high priest,” actually outlines most of the rest

of Hebrews. The idea that Jesus is faithful is the main point of chapters three and four, at least up to 4:14. The idea that He is merciful is covered in 4:15 to 5:10. The idea that He is a high priest is covered in chapters seven, eight, nine, and ten. Chapter six is a kind of interlude. Here is what the writer of Hebrews says about Jesus: He is our great high priest, and He is a high priest for a purpose, or a reason. It was necessary for Jesus to be conformed to His brothers so that He might be merciful and faithful in His service to God. That is to say, He had to be like us so He could fulfill His mission; only a human can participate in our lives so as to redeem us. He had to be made like us for the purpose of making atonement for the sins of the people. Only a human being could stand as the representative for human beings before God. He had to be made like us in order to represent us and make atonement for our sins. He who is merciful and faithful became a man and now sympathizes with us. Chapter 2 verse 18 says, "Because He suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted." There are two things here: He suffered and now He is able to empathize, or sympathize, with us, but not just that. He is also able to help us. By His incarnation two great things happened. He came to understand us and He came to help us, showing both compassion and action.

We will now outline this great sort of theme statement in 2:17 - 3:1. I will ask you to follow along with me and see where this is going because the next few chapters are kind of complex. It goes like this: Jesus, first of all, is a faithful high priest. He is faithful like Moses (3:1-6) and yet He is more faithful than Moses, as we will see. Moses was faithful and now Jesus is faithful and the next section, 3:7-19, says Moses was faithful, but the Israelites were not faithful to him and so God punished them. That leads to a question: what about you? Will you be essentially like the Israelites? Will you also fail to be faithful to the one who was faithful to you, namely, Jesus? A promise of rest remains; chapter 4, verses 1-11, goes on to say that it is not just for anybody; it is only for those who persevere and do not harden their hearts. Beware if you think you can harden your heart and hide it from God. Nothing is hidden from God (4:12-13). That is harsh, but then he goes on to say that Jesus is also merciful. He is in heaven interceding for us. He is a high priest and one of the jobs of a high priest is to deal gently with people who sin (5:1-3). He is a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. As a high priest, He learned obedience and prayed and groaned. He understands what we go through. He intercedes for us and knows how we suffer. He prayed for release from the same things. That is a quick overview of chapters three, four, and five.

Let us go back and look in a little more detail at the description of Jesus in chapter three. Chapter three begins with a command: "Therefore, holy brothers, set your thoughts on [or ponder, consider] Jesus." That little word, "set your thoughts on—"ponder" or "consider"—is used a number of times in the Bible when we are supposed to pay attention to something and contemplate it. For example, it says in Romans 4:18-20 that when the promise was given to Abraham that he would have a son, he considered, or pondered, the fact that his body and the womb of his wife, Sarah, was as good as dead. In other words, he basically said, "You know, I am 100 years old and I am just about dead reproductively speaking. My wife, she is just about dead too." He did not deny that. He considered it, but he also considered that the promise of God is greater and so he continued to believe. We are told in James to ponder ourselves as we look into the law of God. This means to look carefully, to not just take a glance, but to really take a look at ourselves. In this way we are to ponder Jesus.

What will we see when we ponder Jesus? We will see He is an apostle and the high priest of our faith. He is the one who is sent (apostle means one who is sent or commissioned). He is the high priest (chapters five to ten), but first the writer ponders Jesus as a supreme leader. In the last lecture we saw that Jesus is superior to the angels and the prophets. Now we will see that Jesus is superior to Moses. Why Moses? Because, among other things, Moses is one of the two greatest heroes of the Old Testament. Abraham and Moses are considered two great, righteous men.

Moses and Jesus have much in common. They were faithful to the one who appointed them. They were mediators of a covenant. They led a generation out of the wilderness. Moses led the Exodus generation. Jesus, of course, led not the Exodus generation, but the church. They both received the revelation that set them apart from all others. Moses saw God face to face; Jesus, of course, is God. Both were superior to angels. Both enacted a covenant where angels helped, but they were more important. Jesus is superior to Moses in several ways. Chapter 3, verse 3 says that whereas Moses was faithful in God's house, Jesus built God's house. Moses was in the house and Jesus built the house. Chapter 3, verse 6 says Moses was a servant in God's house, but Jesus is the son over God's house. And Jesus has been faithful; He fulfilled the promise of a faithful leader. But was Moses perfectly faithful? No, not perfectly.

Some may ask why the author is emphasizing Moses here. Moses is one of the great heroes of the Old Testament, but really this is a part of the theme that Jesus is superior and supreme over all. The new covenant is superior to the Mosaic covenant; that is the point he is making right now. Jesus is the final word of God. No word will be higher. The New Testament is greater than the law and the covenant of Moses, and the access to God through Jesus is greater. Moses had unprecedented access to God. He met with God face to face, but we have more than that. Everybody has that access to God now. So what the author is doing is saying to these Jewish Christians who are thinking about returning to Judaism, "Do not do it. You have what is supreme. There is nothing more that you could want than what you have. Jesus was faithful, but how about you?" He says in 3:6, "But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are His house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast." Jesus was faithful, but how about you? Will you hold on? Jesus was faithful to us, but will we be faithful to Him?

If you have an older brother or sister, could you count on him or her? Could you count on your older brother or sister to come through for you in a time of need? You get used to the idea that your brother would be there for you and that he would be loyal to you. But one of the things that can strike younger brothers and sisters is when they realize as they get a little older that the older brother or sister may need them. The older brother or sister was faithful to you, but will you be faithful to him or her? That is a life question, and that is a question here. Jesus is faithful to you, praise God. He was faithful, He finished the task, but are you faithful to Him? That is the issue in chapter three.

Hebrews 3:7-11 is an Old Testament quotation from Psalm 95. Psalm 95 was used in the synagogues in Jesus' day as a call to worship; it makes a great call to worship.

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD;
let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.
Let us come before Him with thanksgiving
and extol Him with music and song.
For the LORD is the great God,
the great King above all gods.
In His hand are the depths of the earth,
and the mountain peaks belong to Him.
The sea is His, for He made it,
and His hands formed the dry land.
Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;
for He is our God
and we are the people of his pasture,
the flock under His care.

Then it goes on in verses seven and eight to say this: “Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did.” What they are saying is, when you come to worship at the synagogue you should bow to praise God as your shepherd, as your maker, and as your God. But when you come and listen to the Word, do not harden your heart. Do not praise Him during the chorus, song, and prayer times and then close your ears when the Word is propounded to you. There is no profit in that. What God is saying is, “You need to make use of what you hear. Consider the perils of unbelief.” This is a very wise thing that they did. Do you know what this reference is in Psalm 95 to Massah and Meribah, the time of testing in the desert? The story of Massah and Meribah is in chapter 17 of Exodus. But the people crossed the Red Sea in chapters 13 and 14 and they sing a song about it in 15. But by chapter 17 they are out of water and they say to Moses, “We want water. We demand water!” They tested God saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?” That is to say, “Moses, we want water. We want water now. And if you do not give it to us, we do not even believe God is here. We will go back to Egypt.”

Now, that was not being faithful to God. That was not making use of the revelation that had been given to them. Hebrews wisely uses this reference from Psalm 95 as a way of meditating on the perils of unbelief. When you test God, the results will be poor. There is also a reference in Psalm 95:10 to Numbers 13 and 14, the fathers’ testing, trying and wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. It says in verse 11, “So I [God] declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’” That oath, “You will never enter my rest,” is the consequence of the rebellion of Israel at Kadesh Barnea. The people were ready to go into the Promised Land and they sent out 12 spies. The 12 spies said, “It is a good land, flowing with milk and honey, and the crops are abundant.” But what was the problem? There were giants there. Ten of the spies said, “The men of this land are too big; we look like grasshoppers in their eyes and that is how we felt in front of them.” God said, “Go conquer this land,” and they said, “We cannot do it.” God said, “Okay, then do not go.” They said, “Oh well, maybe we will go.” He said, “No, you said you would not go, and now you cannot go.” They said, “No, we will go,” and He said, “If you go, then you will get what you said, because you rebelled.” They went anyway and they were crushed. Twice they were defeated because twice they were unfaithful. Then in Numbers 14, God pronounces the judgment on them in very strong terms. Numbers 14:21-23 and 29-32 read this way:

Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times—not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it. [...] In this desert your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected. But you—your bodies will fall in this desert.

He is saying, “You said God would not bring you in and your punishment will be that your own words of unbelief will be true.” That is what the author of Hebrews is alluding to. He is talking to this generation that saw all the work of God and made no use of it, and so he warns them about that. He says in Hebrews 3:8, 13 and 15—he keeps telling them over and over—“Do not harden your hearts the way that generation did. Do not harden your hearts.” He says it in a couple of different ways. The first way he says it is through a form of negative command that means, “Do not even start.” It is spoken to those

who are maybe on the verge of hardening. He says to them, “Do not even start to harden your hearts.” He is saying to this generation, “Do not do it. You have an even superior revelation to what that generation had. They had crossed the Red Sea and they grumbled about that. They had manna falling from heaven every day, but you have something better. You have the revelation that comes in Christ and is superior to all from the old covenant. So do not even start down this path.” Then he says it again in verses 13-15: “Do not harden your heart.” Hardening your heart has two meanings in the Bible. Hardening your heart, first of all, means to be insensitive to the needs of your fellow man. For example, Jesus says that Moses allowed divorce because of the hardness of the hearts of the Israelites. There is an element of hard heartedness when you divorce your wife or husband for any cause other than adultery or desertion. There is hard heartedness because you are saying, “I really just care so much more about myself. I do not really care about your misery, suffering, loneliness, financial need, shame, or isolation that will come as a result of this. I do not really care. I have to get on with my own life.” That is one meaning of hard heartedness in the Bible.

Hard heartedness also means insensitivity to God. “Do not be hard toward God. Soften your heart to Him. Respond to Him.” The author’s concern for this is found verse by verse. His concern is that they would fall away. In 3:12 he says, “See to it that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away.” That word, “turn away,” can also mean “fall away,” “depart,” or “leave the faith.” Let me say it this way: these people are in danger of dying for their faith. There is nothing wrong with being afraid, but there is something wrong with running. I have never been in war, but I have talked to people who have and read enough stories to know that we would be afraid. The bravest man is afraid. There is nothing wrong with being afraid. In fact, there is something wrong if you are not afraid; we need to remember that we can die. But there is something wrong with letting the fear rule you so that you run away or refuse to fire a weapon or listen to the commands. That is deadly. It is one thing to be afraid, but it is another to turn away from the living God. Thus his concern is that they may fall away and refuse to believe.

The remedy is found in 3:13: “So encourage one another daily as long as it is called today.” What day is called today? Every day is a day we call today. There is no day that is called tomorrow while you are in it. So he is saying, “Encourage one another every day and that will keep you from being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” Now this bears meditation. What he is saying is that the cure for the desire to run is to encourage one another always. Sin can deceive you, he says. What he is implying is that people do not give up the faith because they decide, “Today I will cease to be a Christian,” but because they drift away. They drift away and no one is there to encourage them back. The best antidote to troubles of this sort is for the Christian body to love and encourage one another. That is the best way. If encouragement does not come naturally to you, learn how to be an encourager. Some find it more difficult than others to praise other people, but whether you find it difficult or easy is not particularly germane. You are commanded to be an encourager and that will keep your brothers from falling into sin. In verse 14 he says, “We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.” We have to hold on to the end. Here is how you know that you partake in Christ: if you had this initial sense of belonging to Christ and then you hold on to it until the end. That is how you know that you really partake in Christ and your life is in Him. The author gives the conclusion again in verse 15: “As has just been said: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.’” That applies first to Moses’ generation, but Hebrews is saying it applies just as much today. The covenant people will always be tested and tempted. There will always be times when you can say, “I saw in the past what God did for me, but I am not sure today.” The Israelites crossed the Red Sea in chapters 13 and 14 of Exodus, but in chapter 17 they want water now. They march through the wilderness and have food fall from heaven, but they are still not sure that He can take them into the Promised Land. It is not

just them, but it is also us. We too can see what God did in the past but forget and say, “But I think He has run out of providential loving care for us.” That is the danger.

This section has been warm at times, and direct at times, but now the author moves to a pretty harsh section. In 3:16-18, as he puts some questions to his listeners, he says:

Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter His rest if not to those who disobeyed?

See how rough that is? He is pounding them with questions. Then he adds, “So we see that they were not able to enter because of their unbelief.” It seems like he is just about ready to say, “Likewise, you will not enter.” This series of questions is a rhetorical device that was used in antiquity, called the diatribe. A diatribe is a particular form of interaction between a teacher and his students. It is a rough form, but it is also a form that was used between people who knew and trusted each other. The idea was that the teacher would pound his students with questions to which they should know the answer, shaming them into considering the truth. Who rebelled? Was it not it every last one of them? With whom was He angry? Was it not those whom He killed and whose bodies fell? To whom did He swear? Was it not to those who did not obey? Yes it was.

Hebrews 4:1 then draws the conclusion: “Therefore, let us fear lest we also fall short of the rest.” He goes on to say in verse two, “For we also have had the Gospel preached to us, just as they did, but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.” There is a promise that remains, but the Gospel is good only if you combine it with faith. You have to mix promises with faith. Promises by themselves will never save you. Similarly, flour by itself will not give you anything. Flour plus sugar, cocoa, yeast, butter, and all the other ingredients, will give you food. You have to mix promises with faith. Then you will find blessing for yourself.

“Therefore, let us fear lest you fail to attain as they did; lest you fail to add faith to the promise and fall short.” How many of you have heard that guilt and fear are not very good motivators? Many people say we should not motivate people with guilt and fear. We have a sense that motivation by guilt and fear is not quite Christian. It is sub-Christian somehow. Is there a place for using fear as a motivator in the Christian life? It depends on the situation, how you use it, and what sense of fear you use. Let us distinguish between different kinds of fear. Theologians have said historically that there are two kinds of fear: filio and servile. Servile fear means the fear such as of a servant quivering in front of the master, wondering if he will be beaten or disapproved of. There is no love. You do your job in order to not get disapproval. That, of course, is not the kind of fear that Christians should have, but there is a place for servile fear. Filio fear is from the term for one of the forms of love, filia. Filia is affectionate love and filio fear is affectionate fear. There is such a thing as affectionate fear. There is a place in the family for children to have an affectionate fear of their parents. That is to say, you know your parents love you, but you do not want to disappoint them. You are afraid of what they will say when you do something wrong, partially because you are afraid of punishment, but more because you are afraid of disappointing them or letting them down. Proverbs commends this fear repeatedly: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” That is, understanding that God is awesome. He is a judge. He is righteous. He is holy. We said a minute ago that in war it is kind of good to be afraid. If you think about it, in other perhaps metaphorical forms of combat, there is fear. If you go in to take a test, there is a place for a little fear. In fact, if you are not afraid of a test a little bit, you may do poorly. If you are going into athletic competition and the other team is really good and perhaps bigger, faster, stronger, smarter, and better

coached than you are, you should be a little afraid. Maybe having a little fear of being beaten would motivate you to prepare for the contest. It is good to have some fear. Fear of God is the beginning of wisdom and that fear of God includes the idea that God is a judge. As the judge, God can indeed withdraw His pleasure and punish as it says in 4:3: “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.”’” So there is indeed a place for fear. But fear has to have a subordinate place. There is a place for fear, but the dominant note in our teaching and preaching should be the grace and mercy of God. The grace of God is unlimited in some ways, but in other ways it is not. It is not unlimited if you do not partake of it. You have to partake if you truly want to be a recipient of God’s grace and love.

The author adds in 4:3-11 that, if you do indeed mix faith with the promises, there is a hope of rest. He envisions four kinds of rest that are described in the Bible. One kind of rest is God’s rest at the creation of the world (4:3). The second rest is the weekly Sabbath rest (4:4). The third rest is rest in Canaan, which is a type of the eternal rest; it was a rest given to Israel while they were waiting for more (4:8-9). And, of course, there is the eternal rest that we all have in Christ (4:11). He says, “Listen, there is a rest that God offers you: an eternal rest and also even a kind of a rest in this age. The rest He offers in this age is a rest somewhat like the Sabbath, somewhat like the rest Israel was promised in Canaan.” God offers rest to His people if we do not harden our hearts and if we turn in faith.

Let us recapitulate this section and then move on to see the final word in the section. The theme of 4:1-13 is that we should fear. The writer of Hebrews says, “Let us fear lest we fail to enter the rest by failing to listen to the Word or by failing to add faith to the promises of God, lest we hear that word that they heard: ‘They will never enter my rest.’” This is repeated in verse five. “Do not harden your hearts.” He keeps saying that over and over and he keeps promising that rest will come. In verse 11 he says, “Let us make every effort to enter that rest so that no one will fail by following their example of disobedience.” Be warned by the failure of Israel. Make an effort. If you think that you can fool God and play at religion, then you have to understand that it is impossible. That is what 4:12-13 are about. God’s Word is sharp and active. “It penetrates, even to dividing soul and spirit.” In other words, His Word penetrates even things that we cannot. Where does the soul end and the spirit begin? Some theologians used to try to debate that, but now most theologians realize that is not what he means. This verse does not indicate that there is a place where the soul ends and the spirit begins. Rather, we cannot discern the end of where the Spirit is working in our lives and where our own soul ends. We cannot tell that, but God can; God’s Word can. He can see deep inside. His Word penetrates us. It divides, discriminates, and judges (4:12). It is alive. Yes, it is true that it is impossible to hide from God. Nothing is hidden from Him, but everything is laid bare and we have to give an account. If we tried to wrestle God, we would lose. But the point is not that we ought, therefore, to expect God to wrestle and beat us. The point is, make every effort. Examine yourself first, lest God give you an examination that you do not want. Examine yourself first; be hard on yourself.

There is a story I read in a biography of Ludwig Wittgenstein who was one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century. He was not a Christian although he was intrigued by Christianity. As a young man in his 20s he was an elementary school teacher in a poor farming village. To put it mildly, he was disappointed with the efforts and the products of his students and he did not enjoy his job. In fact, he began to abuse his students verbally physically—by hitting them. He pulled one girl’s hair for so long that it began to come out. Not surprisingly, he was dismissed. He decided maybe he had another calling in life, so he went into philosophy. About 12 years later he was appointed to the chair of philosophy at one of the great universities of the 1930s. Before he accepted that position, he decided that he needed to go back to that farming village and find every last student to whom he had been harsh or cruel. He did this because he understood that the disposition that allowed him to do that when he was 25 was still

bound up with him. He was hard on himself first. Now, I am not saying that this man had a truly godly repentance, but in this much he was a model for us: we must be hard on ourselves. Be hard on yourself, face your sins squarely, and repent of your sin. Turn to God sincerely asking for grace, and His grace will be more than abundant. That is the point of 4:14-16.

Then, as soon as he finishes with the warning, he immediately moves on to the comfort. Chapter 2, verse 17 says, “Jesus is a merciful and faithful high priest.” This is the balance to 4:1 and 12-13. He is our great high priest. He has gone to heaven to intercede for us so we can enter into His rest as we hold fast to our confession. He is a high priest who is empathetic. “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with us in our weaknesses.” That is to say, we do have one who can sympathize. Why can He sympathize? Because He has been tempted in every way as we are, yet He is without sin. Thus He is not just empathetic and loving, but He also delivers us. As a result, when we approach His throne of grace, we do so with confidence (4:16). This is all within the context of holding fast to the faith—not being perfect or keeping all the rules, but simply holding fast. We hold fast by saying, “Yes, this is what I believe.” As we do that, we can approach His throne with confidence; we find grace to help us as we need it. We find timely help for our cry and need.

Some people may ask, “Can Jesus really empathize with us? Does Jesus really know what we are going through?” It would seem at first that the answer is no, because He is God. He did not have a sinful nature. That is an advantage. He also did not have the disadvantage of the habits of sin. After you commit a sin 10 times, it is vastly easier to commit it the 11th, 12th, 13th, or 14th time. Once you get in a habit, you do not even realize you are doing it. For example, children’s disrespect toward their parents is often invisible to them. It just comes out of them all the time. They do not know how to stop because they do not know they are doing it. Similarly, some people curse continually. They do not even know they are cursing. Some people cheat and manipulate people in this way and it becomes part of who they are. Jesus certainly did not have that and we do. So how could Jesus empathize with us? Well, first of all, let us just say plainly that Jesus did not face every temptation that we do. For example, He was never tempted to run red lights or to steal software. There are various temptations and He did not face every temptation, but He did face every kind, or class, of temptation. He faced the temptation to find the easy way out, to look for His own advantage, to seize and take things that were not His own, and to withhold the truth at a crucial time. Those temptations were all put to Him during His life. I say that because He was tempted in all things as we are, without the habit or the predisposition, but there was a genuine appeal to Him. When Satan said, “Take these stones and make them bread,” He was hungry and He could do it so it was really tempting. At Gethsemane it was really tempting for Him to leave His mission incomplete. He could envision the benefit He would get if He did not go to the cross because He could really envision the pain of the cross. Thus it was a genuine act. The only way to say it was not genuine would be to deny that He was really a human being. He was really tempted; He genuinely faced these things and endured them. And He did so to the end so that He might be our perfect substitute. His righteousness is given to us. That is why this second section ends with a word of mercy and grace, because you cannot end with fear. The chief, dominant emphasis is on God’s tremendous love. If we come to Him in faith, God will be gracious and merciful to us.