

Lesson 12
Mixing the Promises with Faith
Hebrews 4:1-3a

One of the most frequently used words in evangelical circles is “faith.” What is faith? Faith has been defined as “to trust, to believe, to lean upon” but no definition really seems to get at the heart of faith.

Faith is better illustrated than defined, and it is nowhere better illustrated than in the wanderings of the children of Israel who failed to exercise faith in God, and they stayed in the wilderness for forty years. The wanderings of the children of Israel give us a negative illustration of what faith is not, but in Hebrews 4:1-3 we are told what faith is. Faith, according to the author of Hebrews, is believing and acting upon the promises of God. Faith is trusting in God’s faithfulness.

FALLING SHORT OF SAVING FAITH - Hebrews 4:1

“Therefore,, let us fear...” -- The Hebrew-Christians to whom the author was writing are exhorted to fear God. They are to stand in awe of God’s holiness, justice and wrath because He deals sternly and fairly with sin and sinners. This exhortation is addressed to all the Hebrew-Christians but it is zeroed in on one particular group among these Hebrew-Christians. There were some in that particular assembly who did not give evidence with their actions that they were true believers in Christ. They were seriously considering leaving Christ for Moses; that is, they wanted to turn from Christianity and go back into Judaism. This attitude caused the author to think that perhaps they were only professors of Christ and not possessors of Him.

The “therefore” connects back up with Hebrews 3:19. The Israelites who came out of Egypt wandered in the wilderness for forty years and could not enter the Promised Land because of their unbelief. This unbelief kept many Israelites out of the Promised Land because they never really laid hold of God by faith in the first place. They were never genuinely saved because they hardened their hearts against God and God swore in His wrath that they would never enter into God’s temporal rest or His spiritual rest.

I have been greatly concerned that perhaps some new believers, some young believers and some unstable believers who are earnest in their faith might misunderstand these warnings and think that they are not saved because they are not doing all they could be doing for the Lord. We must remember that these warnings are primarily to unbelievers who are professing Christians. These have never been born again. These warnings are designed to cause the professing Christian to wake up out of his slumber and lay hold of Christ in genuine saving faith. I fear lest Satan should use these warnings to unbelievers and cause true believers to get discouraged and depressed. Satan delights to get God’s people operating on fear and law rather than love and grace. God is gracious, loving, long-suffering and good to all true believers in Christ. God will keep His own people and grant them grace to persevere in the Faith. Remember, little faith brings the soul to heaven while great faith brings heaven to the soul. These warnings are for unbelievers. True believers are to allow these warnings to move their consciences and to

examine themselves in light of God's revelation. Once you have determined you are a true believer, you must push on and God will grant you the grace to persevere. These warnings should only cause a true believer to want to push on for Christ even more.

"...lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it." -- God made a promise to Israel that He would take them into the Promised Land.

"Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession; I am the LORD'..." (Exo. 6:6-8).

God's promise was sure but He would not take the people into the land who did not believe God's promise. Unbelief kept them from experiencing God's blessing.

"Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs, which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, shall by no means see the land which I swore do their fathers, nor shall any of these who spurned Me see it" (Num. 14:22-23).

They fell short because of their unbelief.

A failure to believe God kept the Israelites out of Canaan and God's temporal rest, and a failure to believe in Christ may keep some of these professing Hebrew-Christians out of heaven, God's spiritual rest. To fail to lay hold of Christ for salvation should cause a man to fear because it means he is lost and will meet a wrathful God in eternity! Unbelievers, harden not your hearts, lest you become totally indifferent to eternal issues. If you die without Christ, you shall die in your sins and you will face God's judgment.

What kept Israel out of the land? Unbelief! What keeps people out of heaven? Unbelief! Remember, however, if unbelief counts a man out of God's rest, then belief counts a man in. Men may fall short of true saving faith but they do not have to fall short. Men can exercise saving faith and enter into spiritual rest.

Ray Stedman pastor of Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California says:

"But this second warning is against the danger of hardening. Of hearing the words and believing them, understanding what they mean, but of taking no action upon them. The peril of holding truth in the head but never letting it get into the heart. But truth known never does anything; it is truth done which sets us free. Truth known simply puffs us up in pride of knowledge. We can quote the Scriptures by the yard, can memorize it, can know the message of every book and know the whole book from cover to cover, but truth

known will never do anything for us. It is truth done, truth acted upon, that moves and delivers and changes.”

FAILING TO CLAIM THE PROMISE OF GOD - Hebrews 4:2

“For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also -- The Israelites in the wilderness heard the good news of the gospel as well as the Hebrew-Christians. The Israelites who were Canaan bound heard the gospel. What was that gospel? The gospel is that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ. The Israelites knew in elementary form this message but did not know its full revelation as we know it today. God has spoken to us today “in His Son” who is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament. The Jew in the wilderness knew that salvation was by grace through faith on the basis of a blood atonement. They knew something of Christ through types and shadows. ***“...and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ”*** (1 Cor. 10:4). The blood of calves and goats poured out on the altar in the wilderness was received in divine grace as a covering for sin and this pointed forward as a type or shadow to Messiah who would come and die for sin. The Israelites knew that salvation was by grace through faith, on the basis of blood, in God who would send the Messiah. They knew about God’s promise of redemption and rest but failed to enter in because of unbelief. They had an understanding of salvation but they failed to lay hold of it because of unbelief.

“...but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard.” -- God’s promise of rest preached to the wandering Israelites did not profit them because they did not mix, commingle or unite it with faith. They had the promise but they refused to believe it; therefore, they never entered into God’s rest. They failed to make God’s promise their own. A whole generation perished because they did not believe God. Only Joshua and Caleb entered in (Num. 13:25-33) because they claimed God’s promise by faith.

The Israelites had some kind of belief but it was not belief in the promise of God. When the Israelites stood at the borders of the land, they had no doubts that the land was there. Nor was it that they did not believe that the land was flowing with milk and honey. There was faith but not true faith. They did not believe that God could carry out His promise. Real faith acts on truth. There was belief, there was even a strong desire to enter the land, but they did not because they had no real faith. They would not act upon that which had been given.

What then is faith? Faith is believing God’s promise of salvation in Christ Jesus. Just hearing or knowing the promise has no power in itself but power comes when the Word is mixed with faith. The Book of Hebrews says that God’s formula for salvation is: promises plus faith equals salvation.

Again we quote Ray Stedman:

“The writer says the same gospel was given to us as to them; we have the same good news, the same possibility of entering into a life of rest. These words must be taken seriously. The Word of God knows nothing of the “easy believism” that is so widely manifest in our own day. We think we can receive Jesus as Savior, raise our hand to accept Christ, and that settles the matter.

We will go to heaven and there can never be any doubt about it from then on, though there is no change in our life. But the promise of Christ is that when He comes into the human heart there is a radical change of government, which must inevitably, in the course of its working, result in a revolutionary change in behavior. Unless that takes place there has been no reality to our conversion.”

FINAL REST FOR GOD’S PEOPLE - Hebrews 4:3a

“For we who have believed enter (are entering) that rest; just as He has said, ‘AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH, THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST’...” -- Every true believer in Christ enters into God’s rest of salvation. If we have not entered into God’s rest, then we are not saved. Remember, God’s rest in this context is salvation, not sanctification.

However, there is also a moment-by-moment experiential rest for the people of God who have entered into the rest of salvation. **“There remains (is remaining) therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God”** (Heb. 4:9). The Israelites who were saved entered the land by faith (salvation) but they also had to conquer the land by faith (sanctification). Every true Christian has entered into God’s rest of salvation but to experience a deeper reality of this salvation a Christian must by faith continue to enter this moment-by-moment rest. The Bible says, **“As you, therefore, have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk you in Him”** (Col. 2:6). We received Christ by grace through faith and we must walk in Him by grace through faith. Repeated acts of faith allow us to experience the rest of God.

Every Christian needs to experience God’s rest. The Christian faces all kinds of pressures that the unsaved knows nothing about; he faces the world, the flesh and the devil. The pressures against a believer in Christ are a thousand fold greater than that of an unbeliever. Did you realize that it is harder to be happy in this world as a believer than it is as an unbeliever? An unbeliever is externally and temporarily happy in his sin because he is free from the powerful, insidious pressures that are brought to bear on the believer in Jesus Christ. The Christian can only be happy as he enters into the spiritual rest that God has provided for him in Christ. He enters into this spiritual realm by a living, dynamic faith in Christ and His promises. God has left great numbers of promises for us to claim in the written, inspired Bible. Someone has said there are seven thousand promises in God’s Word to meet every situation.

Guidance: **“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight”** (Prov. 3:5-6).

Finances: **“And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus”** (Phil. 4:19).

Worry: **“Be anxious for nothing (stop worrying about anything), but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”** (Phil. 4:6,7).

Desires: *“Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart”* (Psa. 37:4).

Even as believers we are vulnerable to the wiles of the devil who delights to destroy, discourage and depress God’s people. Our only defense against the powers of Satan is Christ and His power to work rest in our souls. We have God’s promises in Christ. The promises can be learned by study and memorization but they can only be applied by faith.

Faith in Christ brings rest. Notice it does not say that rest comes by an emotional experience, by rationalization, by praying through or by working through but by FAITH! Everything in the Christian experience such as power, strength, ability and testimony comes from experiencing God’s rest. Without rest we have absolutely nothing in the spiritual life. Without a moment-by-moment trust in Christ, we are powerless.

Life for a Christian is filled with pressures, difficulties, heartaches and problems, and we can have only two reactions to them. We can fail to believe God and His sovereign will for our life and be miserable, or we can trust God and yield to His will and experience God’s rest. The life of rest takes place when the outward world is crumbling all about us but there is peace on the inside.

Difficulties and hardships are allowed to come into our lives that we might enter into the center of God’s will through a life of resting in God. In the center of a hurricane, there is a spot where there is no storm, where it is calm and peaceful. The hurricane is blowing everything upside down and backwards but the eye of the hurricane is quiet. In the midst of all our trials and testings, we can enter into God’s hurricane eye, which is the place of rest. How do we get in this rest? By faith! We mix the promises of God with faith!

The unbeliever gets his happiness from dependence upon some person, some thing, some event, some position in life or some kind of success, but for one who believes in Christ God has provided spiritual rest in Christ, and as the believer rests in Christ and His will, he finds spiritual happiness. The only place of rest for the Christian is when he is dependent on Christ who is the source of joy and strength.

CONCLUSION

Saved

What then is faith? Faith is taking God at His Word and expecting God to perform His promises.

I read of an incident concerning Napoleon that illustrates the true meaning of faith. Faith, remember, is taking God at His Word. Napoleon had a beautiful, pure white horse that was very spirited. One day when he was reviewing his troops as he proudly rode before them, his horse reared up and down and he lost control of the horse. The horse reared several times and it looked as though Napoleon would be thrown from his horse. Just then a private stepped out from the ranks, and going right underneath the hoofs of that horse, risking his own life, took that horse by the bridle and by a dexterous move brought it under control. Napoleon, the Emperor, was saved from the possibility of death. Napoleon looked at the man and said in a thankful tone, "Thank you, Captain." The man was a private, but Napoleon thinking the man was an officer, said, "Thank you, Captain." The man took Napoleon, at his word and believed that he had made him a captain, so the man looked up and said, "Of what regiment, sir?" That was faith because he took Napoleon at his word. Napoleon was so pleased and stunned with this man's faith, he said, "Of my bodyguard." After that he was the nearest one to Napoleon all through the war.

Unsaved

If you are without Christ as your Lord and Savior, I plead with you not to harden your heart to Christ. Christ alone can deliver you. Christ alone can give you the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Turn to Christ and be saved, and when you do, you shall enter into God's rest of salvation. What will keep you out of heaven? Your UNBELIEF! What must you do to enter into heaven's rest? ***"Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved..."*** (Acts 16:31).