

WHAT MORE CAN GOD SAY?

(Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews)

Study 3

"Carpe Diem—Seize the Day!"

(Hebrews 3:1-4:13)

VERSES (to ponder and/or memorize)

"See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'Today,' so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." (Heb 3:12-13)

WHAT?

1. Seeing the Big Picture

(The passage in the context of the writer's argument)

One of the Writer's purposes in writing this letter is to encourage Jewish Christians to keep on trusting the Lord. True faith *always* results in appropriate action (Jas 2:14-26). In chapter 11, he will show how those who had faith in God acted in obedience. Here, he gives us an instance where God's people did not trust him, disobeyed and lost out on his gracious plan for them.

One of the problems confronting Jewish Christians was the widespread rejection of the Messiah by their compatriots. Understandably, they would initially have expected that it was only a matter of time before the nation as a whole realized that they had made a terrible mistake in rejecting Jesus (Acts 3:17-26). Paul addressed this issue at length in Romans 3:1-8 and chapters 9 to 11. So, as he develops his case, the Writer must show that this is not the first time the nation has been out of step with God.

It is never easy to be at variance with your relatives or esteemed colleagues. We tend to assume that the majority must be right. You may seem like a lone voice in your family, at the university, or at your place of work. Circumstances take you away from Christian fellowship and teaching, and you begin to wonder:

"How come they take such a different view of things? Was I perhaps mistaken? Is it worth it?" Well, in a sense, you are where many of the Hebrew Christians were. It's amazing how easily we can lose perspective when we are out of the loop.

2. Seize the Day!

Remember, the letter was initially addressed to people who were familiar with Old Testament history. So, the Writer points out that the nation, as a whole, had a serious failure of faith once before. God brought the entire nation out of Egypt by a mighty hand, redeeming them from slavery (Deut 7:7-8). The nation was given the opportunity to enter the land of promise, but disobeyed God on account of their lack of faith. In consequence, the entire nation (with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, who had been in the minority) died in the desert. The readers (and we) must make sure that they don't emulate this bad example through "a sinful, unbelieving heart" (3:12).

3. Greater than Moses, therefore . . .

The passage starts appropriately with a reference to Moses. Nobody had higher standing in the mind of the nation than Moses (Num 12:1-8; Luke 16:29; John 9:28-29; Acts 15:19-21; Heb 11:23-28). And Moses was, of course, the key player in Israel's desert experience. A comparison between him and Jesus was most fitting (3:1-6).

Like Moses, Jesus was faithful (Num 12:7; Heb 3:2). But, just as Jesus was greater than the prophets and the angels, he is greater than Moses (3:3-6). Moses was a servant in "God's house"; Jesus is a Son over God's house. The inference is clear: If it was important that Moses (through whom God led the people out of Egypt) be heeded, how much more important is it that we "fix (our) thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest?" (3:1)

4. Testing Goes with the Territory

There can be little doubt that the trial described in Exodus 17 constituted a severe test. But don't forget that the Israelites had already experienced God's deliverance. Their reaction was extreme. This would not be the last time they would face a trial of faith (Just read on into the Book of Joshua). And so God gives us opportunities to trust him, as we shall see in chapter 11. Faith and

obedience go together. Indeed, it is in times of trial that we have opportunity to grow (Rom 5:3-5; 1 Cor 10:11-13; Heb 12:11-12; Jas2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-7; 4:12-14).

5. It's all about the Promised Rest

Here's the argument in brief:

- In Psalm 95:7-11, the Psalmist, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, exhorts his audience (readers) to respond in faith to the voice of God. (It is quoted in verses 3:7-11).
- It is well known that the generation that left Egypt were in the desert for forty years. There is a terrible irony in the words of Deuteronomy 1:2--"It takes eleven days to go from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea by the Mount Seir Road . . . In the fortieth year . . ." (You can read about Israel's refusal to go up and take the land in Numbers 14).
- The Psalmist refers to a particular episode as indicative of this attitude of unbelief (Ex 17:1-7; cf. Num 20:1-13).
- Two words are crucial in understanding how the Writer uses this passage: "today" and "rest."
- He takes note of the fact that the Psalmist wrote this *long after* the failure of that generation to enter their promised rest (their possession of the land), and also after Joshua had led the next generation into the land (4:8). From this he deduces that "the promise of entering his rest still stands" (4:1).
- While on the subject of rest, he refers to the Sabbath rest that God took when his work of creation had been completed (4:3-4).
- Since the great "rest" still remains, the "today" in the passage applies to us.
- The bottom line is that we need to respond in faith, and faith implies both obedience and perseverance (3:14; 4:2, 11).

SO WHAT?

1. What, according to this passage, was the number one problem of the Israelites who died before reaching the Promised Land? (3:16-19; 4:2)
2. Do you think there is a difference between doubt and unbelief? If so, what is it?
3. "Sin's deceitfulness" (3:13) is an interesting term. Can you think of ways in which we might be deceived to the point of hardening our hearts and even turning away from the living God?
4. How are we to prevent this from happening? (3:13; 4:2, 11)
5. So what is this "rest" that remains for the children of God? . We enter it through faith (3:19; 4:2, 3). Is it a present reality, a future hope, or are there both present and future aspects to it?

NOW WHAT?

Let's be practical about the challenge of this passage.

1. Do you think that we who have trusted in Jesus and experienced his salvation could become complacent and fall short of God's promise? What factors in your life are most likely to draw you away from the living God?
2. Do we encourage one another daily (3:12)? When a brother or sister cools off or "backslides," are we not all partially responsible? Are we really caring for one another *spiritually*? What should we do to help one another?
3. Look at the link between unbelief and disobedience (3:16-19; 4:6, 11). What does that tell you about faith? Are there any areas in your life in which you know you are disobeying God?
4. You may like to look at a passage on a similar theme in 1 Corinthians 10: 1-13. Take particular note of verses 11-13 (of 1 Cor. 10).