
HEBREWS

Striving for the Rest

3:7—4:11

“Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, . . .”
(4:11).

We traditionally have made history one of the pillars of the school curriculum. We are required to study names and dates connected with the crucial events of our history, presumably because we expect to learn important lessons to guide us today. The mere recollection of significant names from the past is supposed to suggest some important lesson which we have learned.

But we have not always learned from history. Often we repeat the same mistakes. We are tempted to resign ourselves from looking at the past, perhaps because we continue to learn the wrong lessons. Henry Ford reportedly expressed a popular view when he said, “History is bunk.” Someone else once said, “The only thing we learn from history is that we do not learn from history.”

Christians cannot avoid looking at the past because biblical faith is rooted in history. We are heirs of a history that extends from the first pages of the Bible until now. It is no accident that the Bible is filled with narratives intended to teach us a lesson. Whether we read the stories of Abraham and Sarah or the later narratives of the fall of Israel and Judah, we learn something about ourselves. Like the people of God in both Testaments, we experience both the hopes and struggles of being faithful. Thus when we read the Bible, we discover people like ourselves who face situations like ours. As Paul Minear wrote in *Eyes of Faith*,

It is as if in the theater, where I am hugely enjoying an esthetic view of life, God interrupts the show with a stentorian announcement; “Is John Smith in the House?” And I am John Smith. And the interruption continues, “Report immediately . . . for a task intended for you alone.”

People who have discovered in recent years the importance of finding their roots cannot afford to ignore their heritage in the narratives of the Bible. These narratives have already addressed many generations, and they will benefit us also if we will permit them to speak to us. We maintain our steadfast commitment by finding our roots in this story. Without it, we would drift along, subject to any new idea our culture might offer.

WHY STUDY THE OLD TESTAMENT?

The world of the Old Testament seems far away from us. We wonder what the Exodus story or the account of the conquest of Canaan has to say to us. Often the study of these books has involved nothing more than the repetition of obscure facts which hardly touch our Christian lives today. We read the Old Testament only to discover genealogies of important persons or to find the prophecies to be fulfilled. Many times we find only a strange world of incidents that have little meaning for us.

For the author of Hebrews, the Old Testament was not a collection of irrelevant facts. He knew that the narratives had a message for the church in his time. The author found lessons in the Old Testament for people of his time who were growing weary and apathetic in their Christian pilgrimage.

A PILGRIMAGE OF FAITH

Old Testament pilgrims also faced a situation like ours. Joshua, whose name in Hebrew was the equivalent for Jesus (4:8), led this pilgrimage. The story of the conquest was not a happy one. It included grumbling and disobedience. The people God released from Egyptian slavery did not enjoy a constant series of triumphs. It would have made a happier story for victories of the conquest to follow immediately after victories of the Exodus. But the people who left Egypt had to wait a long time before they entered the promised land—if they entered the promised land at all. Between the two victories, there was a period of grumbling, disobedience, and temptation to give up on the pilgrimage. And even worse, most of the people failed to reach the promised land after a dazzling beginning. This story became a lesson for the early church. As 4:11 says, “This story was an example to the church” (ASV; NEB).

Hebrews is not the only book of the New Testament to discover a model for the church in this wilderness episode. In 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote about Christians who apparently believed that their salvation guaranteed that they could never fall. Paul wrote about the wilderness story to these Christians, saying, “Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction” (1 Corinthians 10:11). Biblical narratives reach across the centuries to speak to us. We have both good and bad models of response to God’s grace. And we need to hear both. Sometimes, our faith is strengthened by seeing the worthy models of those who have responded in faith, as we notice in chapter 11. At other times, the Bible gives us examples of disobedience and failure so we might learn from their experience.

A WORD OF WARNING (3:7-19)

We see that 3:7—4:11 is a sermon on the subject of the pilgrim people. Like a good preacher, the author bases his sermon entirely on Scripture. The Scripture quoted in 3:7-11 is taken from Psalms 95:7-11. In the psalmist’s memory of the wilderness generation, he recalls God’s anger with people who had failed in the time of temptation. Even though Joshua 21:44 had said that “the Lord gave them rest on every side” (Deuteronomy 12:9; 25:19), the psalmist

recalls another side of the story—God’s stern oath that “they shall not enter My rest” (Psalms 95:11; Hebrews 3:11). The psalmist recalls the tragedy of those who did not reach the goal, not the victories of the conquest. They discovered God was not to be toyed with.

What do we learn from our study of the Old Testament? What does the story of the wilderness wandering say to us today? Hebrews 3:12-19 suggests that the Bible warns us. The stern words of the psalm are also addressed to us: “We have had good news preached to us, just as they also; . . .” (4:2). We, too, are on the way to the promised land. We are on a journey filled with doubt and despair, a pilgrimage that is never easy. And, like the wilderness generation, we began our journey with high expectations for joy and triumph along the way. Some of those expectations turned to disappointment.

We cannot miss the element of gravity that pervades Hebrews. The author consistently sees in the Old Testament a warning to people who trifle with God’s invitation. He asks in 2:3, “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” In 12:29, he says, “Our God is a consuming fire,” the One “with whom we have to do” (4:13). The Old Testament presents us not only the model of heroes who lived by faith, but also negative examples like Esau who “found no place for repentance” (12:17). Once the author says, “See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking . . .” (12:25). The Old Testament includes reminders that our salvation is conditioned by our response. The God who pronounced a judgment on Israel also warns us.

People are often tempted to read the Bible to support or defend a position they have already taken. We like to identify with the heroes and to think of ourselves as having their virtues. But this is not the only way to read the Bible. We should also see ourselves as disobedient and rebellious children of God like the murmuring children of Israel. Therefore, the author of Hebrews says, “Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God” (3:12). When the early Christians looked back on the story of disobedient Israel, they did not self-righteously conclude that they would do better. Paul concluded from this story, “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians

10:12). History tells us we, too, can fall away. We began the pilgrimage as they did. Their failure to reach the goal is a lesson for the church.

Hebrews 3:16-18 clearly states the lessons from history. The author asks five questions which dramatically confront the listeners. The first and third questions are answered by the second and fourth questions. The fifth question contains its own answer. The point is this: Those who began the pilgrimage under the mighty acts of God were the same ones who were destroyed in the wilderness. Their unbelief led to their failure (3:19).

IF WE HOLD FAST

These questions underline the fact that our salvation is always conditional. Like the Israelites, we have enjoyed a good beginning. Now everything depends on us. Two passages in Hebrews indicate that our salvation is conditional: “. . . His house whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end” (3:6); “For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end” (3:14). These two verses suggest that we have been given a firm confidence. The Greek word for “assurance” (*hypostasis*) in 3:14 means “something solid under your feet” or “a place to stand.” The Greek word translated “confidence” (*parresia*) is also used in 10:19. It carries the connotation of “boldness” or “freedom of speech.” It was the right to appear boldly before a ruler. Now that God has given us this firm *confidence*, everything now depends on our response. We cannot miss the significance of “if” in verses 6 and 14.

Undoubtedly, the church has a perpetual problem of having some who fall away. One remedy suggested in Hebrews reminds us of our responsibilities for each other. “Take care, . . . lest there should be *in anyone of you* an evil, unbelieving heart” (3:12; emphasis mine). We are responsible for each other! “Encourage one another day after day, . . .” (3:13). The professional minister is not the only one who looks out for the pilgrims. It is the task of the whole church. We maintain the faith by traveling together. Alone we fall away; together we nurture each other along.

Do we learn from history? We recognize that God’s gift is to be taken seriously. We understand the wrath of God, which comes as a warning to any age tempted to give up on His prom-

ise. Their story could be our story (4:11).

THE GREAT PROMISE

There is another side of the story which we dare not overlook. The Bible is not only a threat to those of us who would consider denying God’s gift. It also encourages us when we are tempted to fail. Despite our chronic disobedience and ingratitude, God still achieves His purposes. When Israel complained earlier about the absence of God, they learned that His absence was not final. When Elijah believed he was the only faithful person left, he discovered that God still had seven thousand people who had not bowed to Baal.

Thus, in addition to the wrath of God which we learn of in the Bible, there are also words of encouragement. Many times it is encouragement which we need most to hear. Paul reminds us, “Through . . . the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). We look to the Scriptures not only to see ourselves in Israel’s failure, but also to hear God’s promise to Israel and to us. The entire biblical story demonstrates that God’s word of promise is trustworthy.

Much of the imagery of our hymns pictures the church as pilgrim people overlooking the promised land. Hope in the future keeps us alive on the pilgrimage. We cannot remain faithful if no future awaits us.

Israel’s experience is like our own. We, too, stand before God’s promise. The good news is that “we who have believed enter that rest” (4:3). The promise still remains for us! But it is not the promised land of the Old Testament that we expect. Hebrews 4:4 suggests that we are now on our way to the kind of rest which only God knows, for He “rested on the seventh day.” We look forward to sharing that rest with Him.

What can motivate us to continue the pilgrimage when we feel that we can go no farther? After the author of Hebrews says, “There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God” (4:9), he concludes his sermon, “Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience” (4:11). The goal ahead of us provides our motivation to “break camp” and continue on our way. The experience of Israel warns us not to quit. The promise of God gives us the will to “strive to enter that rest.” Both the warning and the promise motivate us.

A church that is not rooted in its past will have no resources for countering the inevitable frustrations and disappointments of the Christian life. Without our roots in the past experiences of the people of God, we are most likely to repeat their mistakes and “fall through following the same example of disobedience” (4:11). Without our roots, we will understand neither the wrath nor the mercy of God, and thus we will be unprepared

for the demands of the long pilgrimage.

The key to the survival of the church may lie in its response to frustration and disappointment. Disappointment has been a part of the life of faith from the days of Israel until now. A church that knows its history is aware of both the tragedy of failing to endure and the motivating power of God’s promise.

—James Thompson

Applying Scripture to Life

Desire for Peace

Thomas á Kempis said, “Peace is what all desire, but not all care for the things which pertain to peace.”

The Right Choice

A story in mythology says that when Achilles was born his mother went to consult the oracle at Delphi as to what sort of man he would become. The oracle declared that he would either live a long life of inglorious ease or a short life of valor and victory. The mother mistakenly desired for her son an easy time. So she dressed him like a girl and hid him on an island where nobody lived but girls. There he played like a girl and looked like a girl, and everybody thought he was a girl.

By and by, the Greeks went to war against Troy. For a long time they fought in vain. Then they consulted the oracle at Delphi as to how they might win. “You can only win,” came the answer, “by enlisting Achilles in your cause.” But nobody knew where Achilles was. At last Ulysses undertook to find the hero. In his wanderings, he came to this island

where nobody lived but girls. He disguised himself as a peddler, filled his pack with the toys and trinkets in which girls delight, and went to sell his wares. The girls bought eagerly, but one stood aloof and looked on with contempt. At last the peddler brushed away his toys and ribbons and produced a gleaming suit of armor and a flashing sword. The girl who had stood aloof sprang forward at once with eagerness. She put on the armor and began to wield the sword, and Ulysses said, “There is the hero. There is Achilles.” He could tell him by the fact that he chose weapons instead of toys, that with which he might serve rather than that by which he might be served. We, too, must make such a choice if we are to justify our right to a place in the sun.

An Open Heart

More than half a century ago, a yacht landed one evening at the wharf of Inverness, Scotland. Two young men disembarked and set out upon a walking tour. They got lost. Late that night they knocked at the door of a

farmer's house. Though they pleaded that they were both hungry and cold, the farmer kept the door shut. They went to another house a mile or more away. This farmer was more hospitable. Though it was past midnight, he opened his door. To his surprise, he found that one of the young men was a prince who later became beloved George V of England.

Sacrifice

Stephen was the first of Jesus' followers to give his life for the faith. In dying he achieved what could never have been accomplished in living. As the Jerusalem mob hurled its stones, a young Jewish rabbi witnessed it and was never the same afterwards.

Finances

Hoover Rupert said that someone has figured America's cost for one month in Vietnam would buy four years of training for 169,000 school teachers, 125,000 nurses, and 50,000 doctors. In addition, it would provide a college education for 100,000 students who could not otherwise afford it.